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The Adventurer

Lloyd Osbourne

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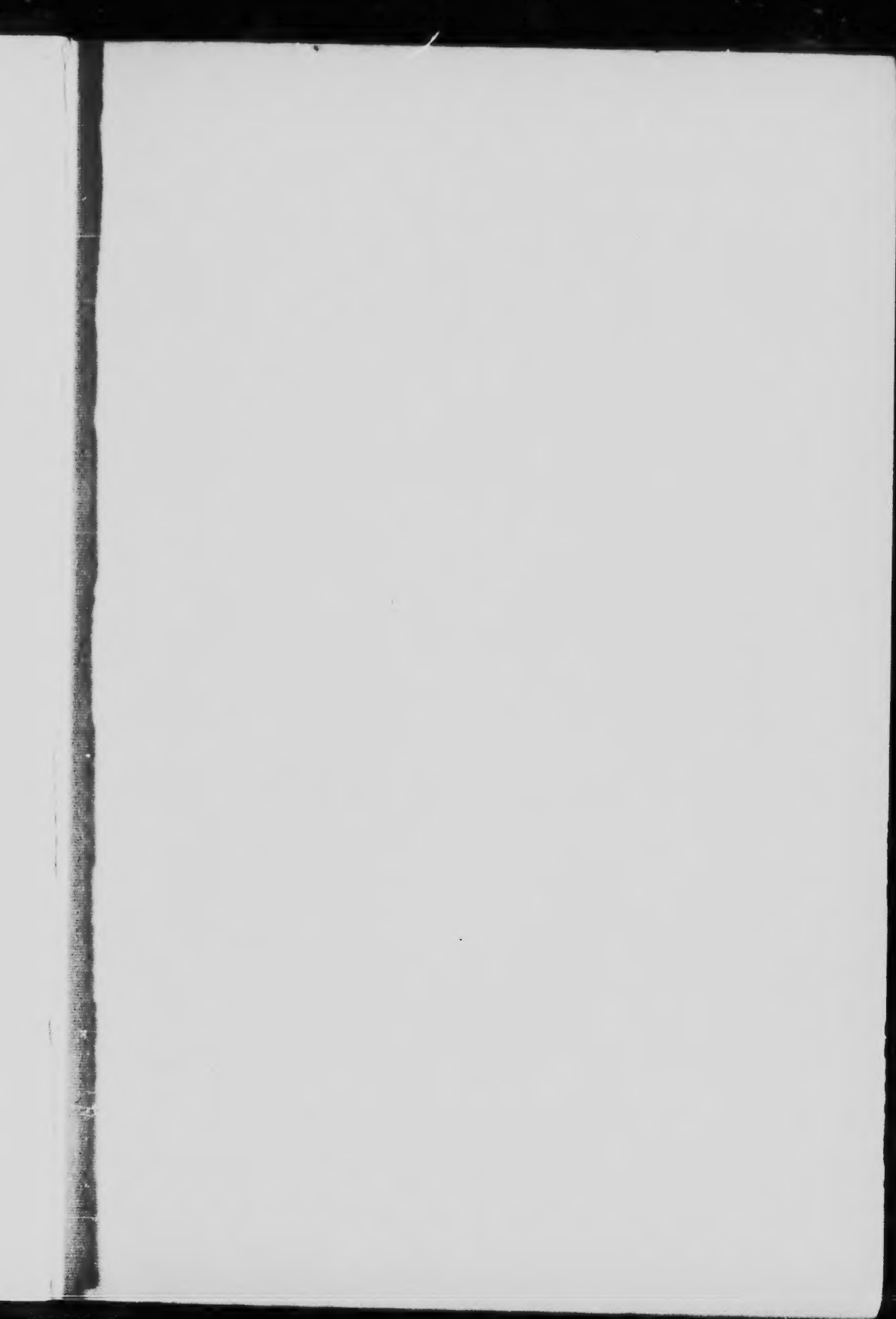
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THE
ADVENTURER







"The ship drove through a sea of rearing horses and naked, shrieking humanity."

[Page 258.]

THE ADVENTURER

LLOYD OSBOURNE

Author of "Baby Bullet,"
"Wild Justice," etc.

TORONTO
THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY, LIMITED

PS 2495

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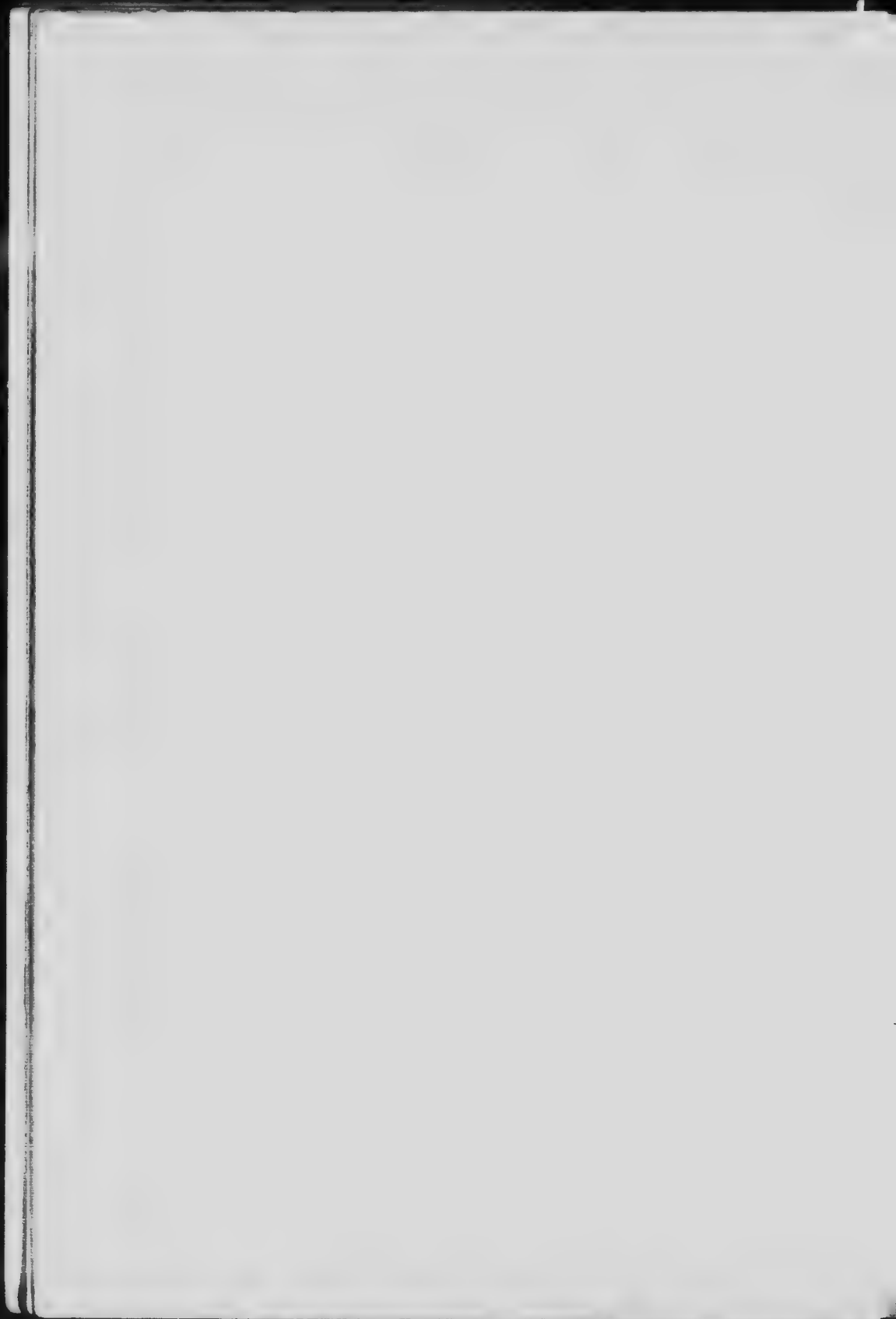
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Published September, 1907

PRINTED AT THE APPLETON PRESS,
NEW YORK, U. S. A.

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THE ADVENTURER

CHAPTER I



WHY do other men succeed, and I fail?" How often does the unsuccessful man ask himself this question as he sees about him, on every side, the evidences of an unattainable prosperity. Clods risen to greatness; mediocrities snuggled into warm berths; dull fellows, without an idea in their wooden heads, perceived high up the ladder, securely perched in affluence. What of better men at the bottom, from whom has been withheld this magic power? What's the matter with them? What invisible lead is weighing down their unfortunate feet? Why has Fate assigned them all the kicks, and reserved the halfpence for the others?

Lewis Kirkpatrick, on the top of a Chelsea bus, was moodily turning over these things in his mind. Ordinarily he would have given them very little thought, but the drizzling London day was favorable to introspection, as likewise were the nine shillings and eightpence in his pocket. Nine shillings and eightpence and the clothes he stood in! That was what Kirk had to show for thirty-two years of an active and adventurous life.

Nine shillings and eightpence!

To look at him you certainly would have thought he might have done better. His blue eyes were bright as a

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girl's—it wasn't drink that ailed Kirk. There was character in his firm mouth; courage in his chin; fearlessness and honesty in the carriage of his head. A fine-looking man indeed—tall, clean built, manly—with broad shoulders and a shapely neck. Not at all the type of failure, though a failure he was. A man damned by his own ability, and cursed by a restlessness that prevented him forever from taking root. Born of an old New England stock, reared a gentleman, and at nineteen, through the death of his parents, cast out in the world to shift for himself—such was Kirk's earlier history. He could swim anywhere, make a living anywhere—and this fatal facility had been his ruin. So soon as he learned that he could always make the world feed and clothe him his wanderings began—began, never to end.

He had enough knowledge of the sea to make it bear him where he wished. He could hand, reef and steer, heave the lead, and box the compass. You don't need much sailorizing nowadays to ship aboard a steamer or a fore and after. He was something of a navigator, too, and could take a sight. He could cook, figure out accounts for the captain or supercargo, work a donkey engine, and repack a leaky stuffing box. What's called a handy man, and always very quick to learn. On shore his abilities were even more extensive. Tutor, photographer, surveyor, bookkeeper—mender of guns and clocks and sewing machines—odd job-man, tinsmith, paperhanger, sailmaker. A good mechanical draughtsman, knew something of assaying and reduction processes, could shoe a horse, milk, shear sheep, and set type. To offset the impression that our hero was the eighth wonder of the world, let us admit frankly that he did none of these things too well. It was just the Yankee faculty of turning his hand to anything, and managing after a fashion to pull through. Part bluff—part raw inherent ability—

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and both aided by a pleasant voice, good humor, and very winning manners. Kirk was a favorite everywhere.

The previous year he had had no more thought of ever finding himself in London than in Kamchatka. He had been trading in the Kingsmill Islands—on a little dot of a South Sea atoll named Arorai. Beginning with no capital, and “staked” by a Chinese merchant named Quo Hong Fat, he had gradually worked up a very good business. True, he was still three thousand dollars in debt, but his turnover was steadily growing more and more considerable, and a few years would have found him the owner of his store and stock, and in possession of a comfortable independence. One night, however, as he was sitting and dreaming on the edge of the lagoon, the smoke of a neighboring fire blew into his face. At the same moment the long and continuous roar of a mighty comber burst upon his ears. It was as though some great express train had thundered by, leaving in its wake the cindery smell of civilization. Again Kirk waited for the roll on the reef, again he shut his eyes and breathed in the acrid smoke; again he had the startling effect of the train whizzing past him in the dark. When he arose it was to find himself hating Arorai, hating his lonely life among the savages, on fire to escape at any cost, and get back to the world of men. The demon of restlessness took him by the throat, and all his bygone hopes and plans disappeared in the throes of an aching homesickness. Not the literal homesickness for the place where he had been born, but for people—white people—the bustle and roar of civilization as exemplified by that train—that train compounded of the smoke of a naked savage’s fire and the green seas bursting against the coral.

He nailed up the store, made an exact division of his accounts, buried nine hundred Chile dollars in the copra-shed,

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and gave the Hawaiian missionary a sealed letter to be subsequently delivered to Quo Hong Fat. He retained two hundred and twenty Chile dollars (a little over a hundred in our money)—a sum which he considered rightfully his own—and then began to count the days till a ship might call. It mattered not where it came from, or where it was likely to go. Any road was Kirk's road so long as it led from Arorai.

The barkentine *Ransom* gave him a lift to Sydney, New South Wales, from which a month later he shipped as A. B. on the British tramp *Windsor Castle* for the port of London. Here in due time he arrived, with thirty-nine pounds in his pocket; and installing himself in humble lodgings in Radnor Street, Chelsea, took in the tail of the London season. He did the galleries of all the theaters, took in all the sights from the Tower to Kew, sat in the Park in his shabby blue clothes, and watched the wonderful procession of the smart and the great. Saw the king bowling by in a gold carriage, with postillions and outriders. Saw Westminster Abbey. Spent long days in museums. Took trips in the penny steamers. Gorged himself with civilization.

He hoarded his money; carried his lunch in a paper package; read the daily paper in a free reading room; grudged every cent that debited itself upon his freedom. Not that he had any fear of want. Shipping was brisk, and the port short-handed. Three pounds ten were the wages out of London; and often, as mentally he cast up his accounts on his homeward way, the bells would ring out the refrain: *Three pounds ten, three pounds ten, three pounds ten*—at once comforting and disquieting—as the inevitable end of his holiday forced itself upon him.

One afternoon, returning somewhat earlier than usual, he discovered the sidewalk blocked with a large part of his landlady's effects. From the door more were issuing in a pell-

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mell manner, suggestive of riot and revolution, while the unfortunate lady herself, in a sea of wreckage, was tearfully expostulating with a red-faced man. It seemed that Mrs. Brundage—such was the worthy creature's name—had been dispossessed; and lacking the sum of eleven pounds fifteen shillings and ninepence was in the process of being put out on the street. Of all human catastrophes, there are few more moving to the heart. The dejected furniture, the tumbled mattresses, the poor, shabby household gods shivering in the rain—it is a hard man, indeed, who does not feel a gush of pity at such a sight. Though he could but ill afford it, Kirk paid the sum demanded, and laid up in Heaven £11.15.9 $\times$ 100.

On earth this left him with exactly two pounds, fourteen shillings and threepence halfpenny!

The populace acclaimed his noble action. The red-faced man gave him a receipt. Mrs. Brundage, inarticulate with gratitude, assured him brokenly that he would not be out a penny, and that he was to consider his board and lodging paid up in advance for sixteen weeks to come. Had the unfortunate lady been better able to live up to this contract Kirk would have been pleased enough. But as he assisted her to carry in her belongings a gnawing incredulity beset him, and he reflected somewhat drearily on the speculative nature of his tenure in No. 7. Later on, he went out and bought five pounds of shag tobacco, and, determining not to borrow trouble, smoked a philosophic pipe amid the Brundage ruins. If all went well he might now count on food, lodging, and tobacco for sixteen weeks—and with fourteen shillings in hand to meet any unforeseen emergencies was prepared to see a lot more of London before he must needs sign on.

"Three pounds ten," rang out the bells of St. Ste-

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phen's. "*Three pounds ten, three pounds ten, three pounds ten!*"

"Don't you worry, old fellow," said Kirk. "I'm going to stick it out in London for a long time yet!"

For a while it looked as though he might. Mrs. Brundage had a brief period of prosperity induced by two new lodgers. The morning bloater gave way to a slice of ham; tea was occasionally brightened with sausage; the midday lunch packet swelled in bulk. Now an apple, now a large juicy pickle rewarded our sightseeing friend on the summit of his bread and oleomargarine. The number of things you can see for nothing in London is simply astounding. Time and shoe leather are the only requisites. You can hear free lectures, too, on every conceivable subject, from radium to Greek art. You can listen to noble and inspiring music in ancient churches, and feel (for nothing) the uplifting of the spirit induced by beautiful and stately services.

It was hard work, of course. It is always hard work to be very poor. You have to walk miles and miles, and frequently lose your way in the bewildering labyrinth of the streets. But the point to Kirk was that one could pass long and profitable days without the expenditure of a cent. The treasure-houses of the world were open to him. Wonders of art and science, assembled at incalculable expense, and at incalculable pains were as much for him to look at as for any duke. Kirk, in his shabby, blue suit, in his dented billycock hat, in his clumsy boots already far down at the heel—Kirk would have delighted his unknown benefactors by his zest and eagerness. Often in his heart he thanked them for the privileges they had given him, and frequently stopped before their busts or portraits to accord them his meed of gratitude.

"Well done, old fellow," he would say. "Wish I could

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tell you how much obliged I am to you!" And thus pausing before the effigy of the Right Honorable Lord Something Something, with half the alphabet tacked on behind him, Kirk would pay his homage to the mighty dead.

In all his wandering and lonely life he had longed for these things that now at last were within his reach. He had the imagination that can invest dead things with life. He was the sort of man that could get a thrill at the sight of old classic jewelry and traverse the intervening centuries till he seemed to see the women that wore them in the dim and wonderful past—an American of a not uncommon type—to whom the crudities of his own new land, and of his own materialistic generation, had left hungry for romance and beauty.

Thus the gray days passed—not gray to him—but bright with the inner sunshine of long-cherished hopes fulfilled. The only disturbing element was the uncertainty—the Brundage raft, and the likelihood of its suddenly foundering in the financial seas. The two new lodgers had flown away. Ham, sausage, and pork pies became but memories of the past. Bloater again predominated—bloater and tears. Mrs. Brundage's tremulous smile grew more tremulous, and a period of strange disappearances set in. Familiar objects unaccountably vanished. This mysterious shedding of things material first effected Mrs. Brundage's person—her cameo brooch, her old-fashioned earrings, her wedding ring—and by degrees, spreading like some malignant disease, it swept whole mantelpieces, and devoured beds, mattresses, and washstands. The interior of No. 7 Radnor Street was melting like snow in the sun, and one waited apprehensively for the walls to follow.

Another red-faced man might now be encountered, smoking a pipe in the basement, and stolidly reading a sporting

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paper. Mrs. Brundage referred to him as her brother, and seemed greatly agitated at his visit. He was an unobtrusive, uncommunicative person, with a faculty for gluing himself all day to a chair and detaching his mind from the life about him. It pleased Kirk to see the widow's relations rallying to her side, and he ascribed the fellow's taciturnity to the undemonstrative English nature. But there were occasions when he could not resist a certain misgiving—occasions when the silent stranger took on a more ominous aspect, and he asked himself whether indeed he were a brother at all, or not perhaps some obscure, legal phenomenon of a disquieting and threatening nature.

Well, to get back to Kirk on the bus where we left him, you will remember, in the drizzle of a late October afternoon. He had put in the day at Greenwich Observatory, walking there and back, and had found himself so footsore and weary on his return that he had extravagantly climbed on top of the first Chelsea bus. A brooding sense of impending misfortune was too strong to be shaken off. His conscience, too, was troubling him. Although legally entitled to nine weeks more of board and lodging his manhood revolted from imposing himself any longer on Mrs. Brundage. He had to draw the line somewhere, and why not at eating the first floor front?

Descending at the King's Road he turned into Radnor Street. He walked up the steps of No. 7 and knocked. Waited, and knocked again. Mrs. Brundage was unusually slow in opening the door. It struck him for the first time, too, that the house was dark—that no light showed from any of the windows. He knocked again—rap, rap, rap. A head popped up from the neighboring area—ay.

"Looking for Mrs. Brundage?"

"Yes."



"It struck him for the first time, too, that the house was dark."

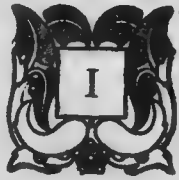
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"She ain't 'ere no more. She went away a nour ago in a keb with her married sister!"

"But I don't understand. Hold on—what's the matter? When is she coming back?"

"She ain't coming back at all. She's sold up!"

CHAPTER II



It took Kirk a moment to collect himself. Tired and hungry, he did not at first appreciate the full magnitude of his misfortune. Then he remembered his kit inside, his tobacco, his rubber boots, his overcoat—all his poor, cheap outfit without which he would be lost indeed. Had Mrs. Brundage packed and left them with the frowsy maid-of-all work next door?

"A sort of blue 'old-all, wasn't it?"

Kirk eagerly indorsed this description.

"It went in the van with the rest!"

"But, good heavens, it was everything I have in the world!"

"Too bad!"

"But the van—where did it go to?"

"Dunno."

"What am I to do about it?"

"Dunno."

"Have you any idea where her married sister lives?"

"Dunno."

"What did she say to the cabman?"

"Nothink. Just drove orf!"

Kirk was too dazed to put any further questions. He walked into the King's Road again. "Signing on," which so recently had appeared the solution of all his difficulties now took a very different look. Sea life is hard enough, even with a modest outfit of flannels and socks—of boots,

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oilskins, and spare changes. Without them—? A man couldn't hope for any advance except on a deep-water vessel. But Kirk had no fancy for square-riggers. He wasn't enough of a sailor for that. They would find him out in no time, and probably disrate him. The food was atrocious, too, and it's no joke to pass a weather earing on a stormy night, with a brute of a mate swearing at you like a bull of Bashan. Kirk's desire was for steam. But he didn't want to die of pneumonia, or be a rheumatic cripple for the rest of his life. No, he must try to get a job ashore, and save sufficient money for a new kit.

Turning over these thoughts in his mind he at length stopped at a baker's and bought a twopenny loaf. And then, out into the street again, surreptitiously eating it while pretending to gaze into the shop windows. He made his way to the free reading room, and ensconced himself in a warm corner with a couple of the daily papers. Surely somewhere in the advertisement columns he would find his job. He had to find his job, and find it double-quick. He had nine shillings and sixpence in his pocket, and not a single thing he could pawn—not even the overcoat that he had stupidly forgotten to take with him that morning. Nothing! In all his past vicissitudes he had never quite touched such bedrock before, and in the worst of his evil days could always at least recall a companion or two with whom he had chummed in. His present loneliness daunted him, and he would have given years of his life for a pal. True is it indeed that misery loves company.

The *Daily Telegraph* began badly, and ended worse. No jobs here—only a disturbing feeling that men of marked ability were a-begging, and their services attainable for a song. The *Daily Mail* was equally depressing. Kirk embezzled the *Times* from an old gentleman who was nodding

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off to sleep; and a perusal of its columns lowered his spirits to zero. Employers wanted deposits, references, certificates, and degrees. They flung out their haughty demands with the consciousness that they could make their own terms. Paragons of learning were invited to East Dulwich for a hundred pounds a year, to rise by yearly increments of five pounds to a final hundred and sixty. Unfortunate governesses, capable of teaching everything under the sun, were expected to be of an exact shade of Protestantism, total abstiners, attractively mannered, and pay for their own washing—out of thirty pounds per annum. The British Empire, as thus reviewed by a perishing stranger, seemed to offer as few opportunities as the upper Congo or the White Nile.

By Jove, here was something! On the first page, three items down the second column! Caught and lost in the twinkling of an eye, and then caught again. Kirk's breath came quickly as he read the startling advertisement. Here was something that might pan out. Here was a job that appealed to all the adventurer in his nature:

WANTED: Resolute men, thirty to thirty-five, single, of superior education, inured to hardship and danger; honest, sober, good-tempered, and above everything able to hold their tongues. Apply by letter in own writing, giving antecedents, to **DESPERATE ENTERPRISE**, No. 199,024 *Times*.

Kirk did not wait to analyse it, did not waste time in speculation. It was enough that he seemed to fill the bill, and all his thoughts were directed to make his letter of application a success. He would be taken or rejected on that letter, and 't behooved him to make it a little masterpiece—if he could. He hurried out for paper and envelopes, and bent himself to one of the hardest tasks of his life. He felt

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instinctively that half the loafers and ne'er-do-weels of London would be in competition against him—hundreds of them, possibly thousands—and that his only chance was to sling his ink effectually. He wrote his letter twenty times—not on the precious paper itself—but in a halfpenny version book, making one rough draft after another. Some he discarded as too modest; others as too breezy and self-complacent. His effort was to hit the delicate mean between the two, and yet draw such a picture of himself that they'd fall over one another to get him.

Finally he chose a sort of censuslike form. It sounded curt and manly, and resolved many of his literary perplexities. He would not try to puff himself—he didn't seem to have the necessary art. A letter full of brag would kill him. He wrote as though he were filling out a printed form. It reminded him of one of those thumbnail historiettes which the police file away in the Rogues' Gallery. Not an extra word in it, yet everything said. Such a letter, in fact, as a resolute man of thirty-two, single, of superior education, inured to hardship and danger; honest, sober, good tempered, and above everything able to hold his tongue—might be expected to dash off "in own writing."

But what of an address? How was Desperate Enterprise to reply to him? He appealed to the grim young lady in charge. Might a letter be addressed to him in the care of the free reading room? She seemed very much perturbed at the suggestion. The rules of the institution hadn't provided for such contingencies. She eyed him darkly, and was at length prevailed upon to give him a very grudging assent, dissociating herself personally from all liability. It struck the grim young lady as a scandalous proceeding. Suppose it became a common practice? Suppose everybody had their letters addressed in care of the free reading room? What if

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the committee complained? What if the post office complained? What if the other free readers complained? He might do it once, at his own risk, but was not to form the habit. He wasn't to regard it as the thin end of the wedge, and expect to carry on an animated correspondence. Nor was he to lay it up against her if his letter miscarried, or got lost, or was accidentally destroyed. The attitude of the free reading room was to be simply passive.

Kirk did not dare to ask her for a stamp. He slunk out and bought one at a grocer's, dropping the fateful letter in the box with unspoken good wishes for its safe and speedy voyage. What a fool he was to count so much on it at all! It might well be that the whole thing was a hoax, or else the cracked-brain absurdity of some silly boys. What if Desperate Enterprise was aged seventeen and lived with his mother? Or was a tottering graybeard with romantic illusions? Pshaw, he mustn't take it too seriously. What really was serious was a bed.

He got a shake down in a Salvation shelter. Fourpence, and twopence more for breakfast. He felt dirty and unkempt. He cleaned his teeth with the end of a burned-out match, and combed his hair with his hands. The chained comb and brush of Salvation repelled him. But their water was all right, and so was their soap. Then he passed out into the streets, with the walk of a man who has nowhere to go and nothing to do. He directed himself first to Radnor Street in the faint hope of recovering his clothes, or possibly meeting Mrs. Brundage, and getting on their track. But No. 7 was shut and silent, with the blinds drawn, and the steps littered with odds and ends of paper and straw. Nothing to be got here except a piercing note of desolation. He went to the reading room, and took up the day's papers, finding in the *Times* a repetition of yesterday's advertisement.

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He took a note of six or seven others, and put in a dreary, hungry day looking for work. Two of them carried him to fee-snatching agencies, whose plausible managers tried to rob him of half a crown a piece. Then he tried for a berth on one of the river steamers and failed. Tried for a fireman's job on the Southwestern Railway and failed. Tried at a type-casting plant, at a storage warehouse, at a sailmaker's loft. No good. Full up, everyone, with only a vacancy here and there for exceptional men, highly skilled in some particular branch. There was a linotype job a-begging but he left it still a-begging. Dispirited and forlorn, he returned to the Salvation shelter, and passed another anxious night.

The next day he was almost too out of heart to return to the free reading room. His money was melting fast, and common sense bade him seek a seaman's institute whose address he had, and try for a ship. Here, at any rate, he had something to sell that somebody wanted. The port was short-handed, and sailormen were in demand. He would ship as cook in a deep-water vessel, and get a substantial advance. Not a job he fancied, but it paid good money, and assured him of a kit. The necessity for that kit was looming up as the biggest need in life. Nobody appreciates the luxury of cleanliness more than a man who is suddenly denied it. No, he would take in the reading room on a chance of a reply from Desperate Enterprise, and failing any word from that quarter, would hasten across the river to the institute.

He addressed himself to the grim young lady, whose unpromising countenance did not serve to raise his hopes. With well-calculated rudeness she allowed him to ask his question several times over before condescending to answer.

"A letter? Oh, yes, there was a letter!"

He took it from her with trembling hands, and retreated

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to a corner near the window. So much was at stake that he could not bring himself all at once to open it. He must nerve himself for a refusal. He must remember the thousands of other applicants. He turned over the envelope in his hand, still withheld by a sort of dread. The paper was of excellent quality, bluish and thick, and addressed in a bold big hand. Kirk summoned all his courage and tore it open. But it held no corresponding bluish thick sheet—only a few words typewritten on another variety of paper: "You seem the kind of man we want. Meet me to-day (Wednesday) at the Vienna bakery, 928 High Holborn, at 2.30 sharp, recognizing me by the green tie I shall wear. Desperate Enterprise."

Kirk read and reread this many times. He was ashamed of the exultation it gave him. Again common sense bade him beware, to steel himself against disappointment, to dash cold water on his absurd elation. But the spirit within him revolted at these prudent counsels. The spirit within him was on fire, and the blood tingled in his veins. Mystery and romance were not to be set thus tamely aside and talked down. Why should one be so confident that nothing existed in the world save the commonplace and the prosaic? After all, was this not as good a way as any other to get recruits for a desperate enterprise—presuming it to be really desperate, of course? "More than anything able to hold their tongues." These words recurred to him significantly. Men who could fulfill all the terms of that advertisement were bound to be rare. . . . Well, there was one thing he might be certain of. They weren't after his money, anyhow. He had told them that he was broke.

It was a hard thing to know how to fill up the intervening hours—the gap from nine o'clock to half past two. He decided to go to High Holborn and look up the rendez-

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vous designated. Suppose, like so many places in London, it was almost unfindable. It was a wonderful old town for losing your way in. What if half past two arrived and he was still groping for it? No, he would chase up that Vienna bakery, take accurate bearings of it, and find some neighboring garden or park to camp in.

Kirk's spirit rose as he turned out into the open air and followed the King's Road into Sloane Street. He knew vaguely that High Holborn was near the British Museum, and that it was a goodish walk from Chelsea, but it would all help to fill up the time and bring him nearer half past two. It was the second day of November—dark and foggy—and the chill of impending winter was already in the air. But he was not in the humor to find fault with anything. To him at that moment London was the most fascinating city in the world. What was grubbiness and gloom to a man who was hastening to enroll himself in a desperate enterprise and meet a mysterious stranger in a green tie?

The Vienna bakery was easily found. It was a good-sized place at the gore of High Holborn and another street, and wore a very smart, pleasant, and appetizing appearance. Through its wide, uncurtained windows Kirk saw rows of little marble tables, and at one of them a waiter whisking chocolate for a lady. He liked the look of the Vienna bakery, and hoped that Green Tie would stand treat. He could hardly do less under the circumstances, and Kirk decided on chocolate, and as many of those crisp rolls as he could venture to eat without making too bad an impression. Six if he could, but anyway three! His hunger, which had been very poorly satisfied at the Salvation shelter, became ravenous at the sight of these outspread dainties. He went in, and timidly bought a small loaf of brown bread for twopence—a horrible extravagance—incurred on the im-

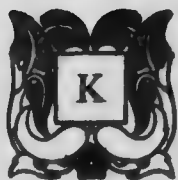
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pulse of the moment and regretted before he reached the street.

But it was an excellent little loaf, though abnormally small for twopence, and Kirk munched it hungrily as he strode away in the direction of the British Museum. In his utter homelessness this venerable pile took on a friendly and welcoming aspect. It assured him of warmth, of a bench to sit on, of a clock. Incidentally he could look up his old friends, the Greek and Roman antiquities, and muse cheerfully on the nothingness of man. Standing before those noble remnants of classic ages his own little hopes and fears dwindled into insignificance. He wiped the telltale crumbs off his legs, and altogether felt greatly refreshed. Even the gray London light failed to daunt his rising courage. If all went well would he not soon find himself embarked on a Dangerous Enterprise, with money in his pockets, and bold, resolute companions? He would recall this unending day as his starting point into the unknown, and amid brighter scenes would look back on it almost with fondness.

One o'clock. Half past one. Two. With his eyes never off the clock he watched the minute hand tediously forge around the dial. At the quarter he was suffocating, and could no longer adhere to his determination to wait for the twenty past. Walking fast, at times almost running, he again made his way to the Vienna bakery, and stopped panting at the door. He could not well go inside without ordering something, and must therefore loiter at the entrance, attracting as little attention as he could. There was another entrance at the side on which he had also to keep a watch; and it was while he was in the spell of a most painful excitement that a tall bulky man brushed past him, and seating himself at one of the unoccupied tables exposed to view an unmistakable green tie!

CHAPTER III



IRK fought down his first impulse to rush in and seat himself beside the stranger. He prudently reconnoitered him instead and gave him a close and earnest scrutiny. Desperate Enterprise was a shabbily dressed, good-natured, breezy-looking, bland individual of about forty, with a tawny mustache and a dirty collar. Yet he had none of the air of a man down in his luck, nor for that matter any appearance of the desperado or the adventurer. He had more the look of an actor, and his whole get-up suggested the theater rather than the real vicissitudes of fortune—and this effect was heightened by a pair of blue eyes that twinkled kindly and merrily.

"I beg your pardon," said Kirk, entering and stopping diffidently before him. "I—I believe you are the gentleman whom I was to have the honor of meeting here?"

The stranger rose to his feet, and assuming a would-be mysterious expression which quickly broadened into a smile, asked if he had the pleasure of shaking hands with L. K.?

"Lewis Kirkpatrick at your service, sir," said Kirk, accepting a place beside the stranger, who motioned him into it, and then sat down himself.

"Call me Smith," he said, "unless you have a preference for something more high sounding?"

Kirk replied with a laugh that Smith was quite acceptable to him.

"Ha, a man of humor," said Desperate Enterprise, laying

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a large fat hand cordially on Kirk's knee, as though to emphasize his approval. "A fellow who can see a joke! Gad, if all goes well you'll soon be initiated into the biggest joke of the century, ha, ha! Waiter!"

Orders were given and taken. Kirk chose chocolate and rolls, wondering all the while whether he was dealing with a madman. Mr. Smith demanded muffins and a pot of tea, and then settled back bulkily into his seat.

"I'm very eager to hear about that job, sir," said Kirk. Mr. Smith's face changed.

"My dear man," he observed, almost with severity, "in this interview I am going to ask the questions, and you are going to do the answering. I admit the one-sidedness of the arrangement, but this is due to circumstances beyond my control. I am here in the capacity of a sifter, and you are the siftee!"

"Very good," said Kirk. "I want to be in on this thing, and am quite willing to go through all the preliminaries."

"We liked your letter." Mr. Smith was looking at him very keenly, and Kirk's first impression of his companion's irresponsibility began to change. Here was plainly a man accustomed to read faces; and his own, when he consented to be serious, was both masterful and authoritative. "To be absolutely frank, you seem the kind of man we want; and my only duty is to find out whether you told us the truth."

"Then go ahead," said Kirk, in no way abashed. He liked Mr. Smith, and he felt pretty sure that Mr. Smith liked him. "I'm all ready to turn myself inside out."

Mr. Smith drew out a piece of paper and a pencil.

"Now about that navigation?" he began suavely. "You tell us you can work a sight. Here's an observation supposed to be taken at ten-thirty-three A.M.—and here's a dif-

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ference in time between an imaginary noon and a Greenwich noon as shown by your imaginary chronometer. Would you mind giving me the latitude and longitude?"

Kirk gazed blankly at the bit of paper on which these facts were scribbled. It came over him that Mr. Smith was demanding the impossible.

"I cannot do it," said Kirk, looking up. "I'm afraid you don't understand. I'd have to have a Nautical Almanac and the year."

"1887, July 27th," blandly responded his examiner, producing at the same time a copy of the Nautical Almanac from his ulster pocket.

Kirk again looked blank. "But, Mr. Smith, I'd have to have a book of logarithms!"

"Here, my friend," said Mr. Smith, placidly laying down another volume on the marble table.

"And the error of the chronometer?" put in Kirk.

From a waistcoat pocket his smiling inquisitor produced the rating.

"You seem to know a lot about it," he said. "My dear man, I don't know how you'll end, but I compliment you on your excellent beginning."

Kirk was rusty in his navigation. Moreover he was hungry and tired, and so wrought up that it was hard to concentrate his faculties. His depression did not escape Mr. Smith's watchful eyes.

"Take your time—take your time," he said. "We've chosen you out of nine hundred already. I can see you know how to do it. Why, the last so-called sailor didn't know he even needed an almanac!"

The waiter rattled down the refreshments. Kirk took a sip of chocolate and began to figure. Mr. Smith leaned back and bubbled over with a singular entertainment.

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Kirk indeed took his time. He did not dare to risk a failure. He was horribly rusty, and had a paralyzing moment of indecision when he was at a loss to decide whether his longitude was east or west. He sipped some more chocolate, and gobbled a roll. Yes, it was east. How could he have been so foolish as to think otherwise! He worked out the position twice—independently.

"Here it is," he said at last. "At least this is what I make it."

Mr. Smith deliberately produced another scrap of paper, remarking as he did so that it was all Greek to him. Kirk's labors were compared. Thank Heaven, the two positions agreed. He breathed a sigh of relief, and hastened to get outside another roll.

"Capital!" cried Mr. Smith, repocketing the two books, and beaming with satisfaction. "Now let us get through the rest of the programme, though I'll tell you right here that in your case it is a mere formality."

This engaging preamble seemed designed to lull Kirk's suspicion; for Mr. Smith was as shrewd and searching in his questions as though he were some eminent counsel blandly crushing a witness into powder. He popped back and forward over Kirk's whole career, pinning him to a date here, a fact there, and then darting up like a jack-in-the-box to tax him with an apparent contradiction. This genial and smiling Mr. Smith, for all his bonhomie turned out to be as diabolical an inquisitor as ever tore a fabric of lies to pieces in a court of law. At times, too, he attempted to ruffle Kirk's temper, and tease him into some hot rejoinder. Some of his questions were almost insults in themselves, but Kirk turned them off with a laugh, and refused to play into his tormentor's hands. Altogether, when at last they stood up to go, Kirk's original opinion of Mr. Smith had changed ma-

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terially. The latter's gay masquerade was a blind. Underneath was a man of strong character, cunning, clever, and full of guile.

"Well, what next, sir?" asked Kirk.

Mr. Smith fumbled in his pockets for a card, on which, in blue pencil, was written, '82 *Tedworth Street. Knock four times.*'

"I intend making a very favorable report on you," he remarked. "Come to-morrow morning at ten o'clock to that address. And now, my dear man, good afternoon, and *au revoir.*"

They passed out of the bakery, and Mr. Smith hailed a passing hansom and jumped in. The last Kirk saw of him was a large fat white hand waving a farewell.

It would be hard to describe Kirk's feelings as he strolled down Holborn and tried to piece together in his recollection all the details of that singular interview. What did it all mean, he asked himself? Who was this man, and what did he want of him? The advertisement had said nothing of navigation. No sailorizing was even mentioned in it. Yet he had been put through his facings as though he had gone up to try for a Board of Trade certificate. Was it just a part of the sifting process? Just an example of this Mr. Smith's thoroughness? He had been three hours on the rack. Three hours! And looking back on it he marveled at the skill and completeness with which his examination had been accomplished. His respect for Mr. Smith was unbounded. Kirk admired capacity, and it boded well for the enterprise, whatever it might be, to have such a man as leader. But was he the leader? That "we" recurred to Kirk. It was always "we." There was an impersonality about Mr. Smith that baffled Kirk. He had never let slip a word or a hint

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as to the nature of the undertaking. His easy-going, comfortable, smiling manner was even disconcerting in the retrospect. Not at all the manner of a man organizing a desperate enterprise. Yet was it not perhaps the mask that concealed a very different Mr. Smith behind? It was hard to say. It was all very mysterious.

But Kirk was very happy. These musings and questionings stirred his imaginations. He had emerged triumphantly from the ordeal—that was the great thing—and he was as good as enrolled already. He had no doubts, no hesitations. An enterprise that was good enough for Mr. Smith was good enough for him. It certainly could be nothing criminal. It was impossible to connect Mr. Smith with anything criminal. But for that matter it was impossible to connect Mr. Smith with anything at all. The man was an enigma. His purpose was an enigma. His light-heartedness and gayety the biggest enigma of all. Yet he had voluntarily spent three hours on Kirk, and gone to a lot of pains to turn him inside out. He didn't strike one as the sort of person to do this for nothing. Indeed, it represented a pretty hard afternoon's work. And now he was off to "report."

Kirk strolled through the darkening streets with the swing and vigor that come of success. There was no lag in his walk now, no indecision as to which street he should take, no crumpled list of addresses to decipher under the gaslights. There was no job to look for now. The job was found! He had won against nine hundred. All he had to do was to exist till the next day, and then knock four times at 82 Tedworth Street. A simple and exhilarating programme, easily performed, and dazzling in its possibilities! And after he had knocked four times? Oh, well, what was the good of worrying about it? He re-

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peated to himself that what was good enough for Mr. Smith was good enough for him.

He treated himself to a generous dinner. He felt that he could well afford it. Roast beef, potatoes, cheese, and a pewter mug of beer. A fellow with a desperate enterprise before him was entitled to live high. It was policy, too, to be in good shape for 82 Tedworth Street. He had to make a good impression on "we," and confirm Mr. Smith's favorable opinion. He promised himself an ample breakfast, a shave, and a shine. Perhaps even a penny flower in his buttonhole. There was a lot at stake. He felt instinctively that anything of Mr. Smith's was bound to be well paid. You are always well paid for risking your life. It was only fair that you should be. He hoped it wasn't too desperate. He was willing enough to take his chances with the rest, but there was something to be said for a whole skin. But what was the good of a whole skin if you had nothing to put inside it—no beef, no potatoes, no cheese, no beer! If you got right down to it, more men died of poverty than were ever shot in battle or drowned at sea. Poverty wasn't as spectacular, but just as effective. A man with any spirit would choose a bullet. He wasn't afraid of bullets. The only lurking dread in his mind was—jail. Hard pressed as he was, with his back to the wall, he was not going to steal; nor murder; nor enter the photogravure or counterfeiting business. It had to be a straight proposition. But somehow it was impossible to connect Mr. Smith with anything that wasn't straight.

This brought him back to the point that it was impossible to connect Mr. Smith with anything at all. Was the whole affair a joke then? Assuredly not. It was too consistent and too well worked out for a joke. It represented too much calculation, too much expense. What of those

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nine hundred other applicants? Of those nine hundred letters to be read and sifted? Of innumerable interviews in Vienna bakeries? It was mighty businesslike. It was mighty thorough and systematic. Suppose he, Kirk, were in a position where he had to raise a small army of resolute and determined men—inured to hardship and danger—could he see any way of improving on the method adopted by Mr. Smith? No, indeed, he would copy Mr. Smith's procedure to the last dot. Advertise, sift out, boil down the whole kettleful to a residue of the right sort. It was a mighty good way to go about it. Yes, a mighty good way.

Kirk passed the rest of the evening in the free reading room, and then went back to his fourpenny cot in the Salvation Army shelter. The next day at the stroke of ten he was on the steps of 82 Tedworth Street. It was an ordinary four-story London house, undistinguishable from its neighbors save for a painted sign above one of the basement windows: "To be leased unfurnished for a term of years; apply to Jaffrey & Thatcher, house agents, 807 Marylebone Road W." It was a most respectable-looking house, in a most respectable-looking street, and except for a tarnished brass knocker, and windows heavily glazed with dust, there was nothing to suggest that it was not a typical roof-tree of Britain's best—the house of a well-to-do professional man or city merchant. The blinds were all drawn down as though the household were still asleep, and in the area there was none of the usual morning bustle of clattering servants and tradesmen's boys. A general lifelessness pervaded the headquarters of Kirk's unknown employers, and his four knocks, as he struck them slowly and deliberately, seemed to reëcho through an empty house.

The door, almost to his surprise, was promptly opened to him by a maid. She was a very pretty woman in the

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usual cap and print dress—a startlingly pretty woman—and Kirk could hardly keep his eyes off her as he told her he wanted to see Mr. Smith. Her voice was as pretty as herself, with a faraway suspicion of a lisp in it, and Kirk was not at all offended at being asked to repeat his question. He did so quickly, still looking at her in admiration.

“You are to come in and wait,” she said. “Mr. Smith is busy at present, but he will be pleased to see you in a few minutes.”

Kirk followed her into a bare hall. There was no carpet on the floor, no furniture, not a sign of habitation. Above them an uncarpeted stairway lost itself in gloom. Had it not been for a jet of gas, burning at the end of the passage, he would have found himself in utter darkness. It was a ghostly business to trail after the housemaid, and guide himself by the wall as she led the way upstairs—a dim figure, dimly seen, outstripping him with her light feet. One flight—two flights—and there she was, panting a little, as she opened the door of a back room. It, too, was lighted artificially, and was as starkly bare as the rest of the house. Here Kirk was left, assured again that he would not be long kept waiting.

Kirk, greatly wondering, went to the window and peeped out at the side of the blind. Below him was a dingy back garden, walled in with brick and abutting on an alley. Corresponding back gardens, identical in size, met his eye in a series up and down the block. He turned away from the depressing sight, attracted by the sound of voices above him. A faint murmur reached him, and once the sudden scraping of a chair. Though he could make out no words, the conversation sounded smoothly on his ears—unexcited, matter of fact, almost droning. He seated himself tailor-

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fashion on the floor, and put his unlit pipe to his mouth. He did not dare to smoke, but the familiar action soothed him, and he found satisfaction in breathing in air. He was not exactly uneasy, but the circumstances were so strange and the veil of mystery so profound, that his heart beat a little thickly, and his nerves twitched with impatience and suspense.

After a while—a long while it seemed to Kirk—the door opened, and the pretty housemaid signaled him to come out.

"They are ready for you now," she said.

Kirk in silence followed her up another flight, and permitted himself to be ushered into the room in front. The gas was brightly burning. At a common deal table, stacked with papers, and with here and there some medical instruments, sat a small, dark, youngish man, scribbling on a pad. He was rather smartly dressed in a frock coat, creased trousers, light-colored waistcoat, and a large Ascot tie pinned with a diamond horseshoe. At his side, tilting backward, was the bulky, friendly form of Mr. Smith, with a cigar in the corner of his mouth, and the same quizzical, good-natured expression that Kirk remembered so well. In a corner of the floor lay a silk hat, a soft felt hat, a silver-handled bamboo cane, and a small leather case, half opened.

Mr. Smith, without rising, greeted Kirk with a cheerful, offhand, "My dear man—glad to see you!"—and indicated the only other chair in the room. Kirk smiled and took it, while the dark young man for the first time raised his eyes.

"Dr. Jones," said Mr. Smith expansively, by way of introduction. "Charming fellow—pride of the medical profession—can find more things the matter with a well man than you could in a whole hospital!"

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"Kindly divest yourself of your coat, waistcoat, and shirt," said Dr. Jones succinctly.

Kirk, very much embarrassed, proceeded to obey. Mr. Smith blew smoke rings, and smiled ambiguously at the ceiling. The doctor filled up the interval by resuming his scribbling.

The examination didn't take long, but it was pretty brisk while it lasted. Kirk was thumped, prodded, stethoscoped, and generally inquired into. The doctor, in a colorless, professional tone, asked those unblushing questions that in anyone else would be resented with a blow. Asked them with an air of quiet incredulity, as though lies were his daily portion—verifying Kirk's answers by unexpected pinches and taps. Mr. Smith's pronounced indifference was a great consolation to Kirk. Mr. Smith did not seem to care a doit, and yawned throughout the proceedings with undisguised boredom. Tilted back in his chair, and dreamily eyeing the ceiling through clouds of tobacco smoke, he settled himself like a man at a railway station condemned to wait for his train.

At last his train arrived. Dr. Jones begged Kirk put on his clothes again, and turning to Mr. Smith, remarked: "Strong as a horse—of superior intelligence—nervous and high strung, but with the good qualities that belong to this class of subject. You will probably find him one of your best men. I pass him with pleasure!"

These unexpected compliments made Kirk glow with satisfaction. The little dark doctor had given no indication that his judgment would be so favorable. His praise, as dispassionate as that of a judge at a poultry show, had the calm sincerity of an expert to whom the fowl itself was of supreme unimportance. Mr. Smith awoke to interest, settled his chair on four legs, removed the cigar from his mouth.

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and bluffly took up the task now resigned to him by Dr. Jones.

"Have you ever seen a thing like this before?" he asked, as he passed Kirk what seemed to be a bank note.

Kirk took it, and examined it attentively. He had to live up to his "superior intelligence," and was prepared for some kind of trap. But to all intents and purposes the bill was one for one hundred pounds—a crisp, new Bank of England note—that rustled most agreeably as he felt and twisted it between his finger and thumb. If it were a forgery he might well be forgiven for thinking it genuine.

"A hundred pounds," added Mr. Smith. "Put it in your pocket, my dear man. It is yours!"

"But what for?" demanded Kirk, very much mystified. "What am I to do with it?"

"Anything you please," replied Mr. Smith. "My dear man, you have successfully passed two stages of our sifting process. This note is number three!"

"But am I not to be told yet?"

"Told? Told what?"

"The meaning of the whole affair? What it is you want of me, Mr. Smith?"

Mr. Smith burst out laughing. Even the doctor appeared to enjoy the sight of Kirk's disturbed and surprised countenance.

"My dear man," began Mr. Smith, controlling himself with difficulty, "let me explain a little further. That note is yours—to do exactly as you like with. Go away. Spend it on drink, or women, or ginger beer—or salt it down in the Post Office Savings Bank. Only, if on Monday afternoon you cannot bring it back here intact—intact, mind you—the people I represent have no use for your services. It is the final test of your character and self-control, and you

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may find it the hardest one of all. No question of honor is involved, nor honesty, nor anything of that sort. We make you a present of that hundred pounds. Only, as I said before, if you don't bring it back to us on Monday afternoon we shall decide that you're not the man for us. And when I say a hundred pounds, I mean a hundred pounds, and not a penny less. Don't bring us any sad tale of how you were unavoidably compelled to eat up eleven shillings of it—or ninepence of it—or, by Jupiter, threepence halfpenny of it. We want the whole note or nothing. Got the idea?"

"I think I have," said Kirk in a maze.

"You may find," continued Mr. Smith, "that weighed against an unknown enterprise, of an admittedly hazardous character, with risks and hardships swollen by imagination—that a hundred pounds in the hand is worth a lot of birds in the bush!"

"Let's get on to that," said Kirk. "Not that I'm attempting to force your confidence, Mr. Smith, or learn what I can plainly see you will not tell me. But there are two questions I consider I have a right to put. First, Is there anything criminal in this enterprise?"

Mr. Smith brought his hand down on his fat leg with a resounding smack. "Not by a jugful!"

"Question number two," went on Kirk. "What is there in it for me?"

Mr. Smith paused impressively before replying.

"Possibly nothing," he responded at last. "Possibly nothing at all."

"Oh!" exclaimed Kirk.

Mr. Smith raised his hand as though to stop him.

"Possibly—even probably—a fair-sized fortune."

"A fair-sized fortune? What do you call a fair-sized fortune?"

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Mr. Smith's voice grew suddenly serious.

"Well, say from ten to one hundred thousand pounds!"

Kirk stuffed the note in his trousers pocket. The action spoke volumes. Even as he did so the dazzling housemaid tapped at the door, and informed Mr. Smith that Joseph Gill was below waiting to see him.

"Mr. Smith," said Kirk, breathless with excitement, "if I'm not here Monday it will be because I'm dead. If you have nothing else to ask of me, I will say good morning!"

Mr. Smith gave him his hand. The doctor looked up from his pad and nodded. A minute later the front door closed on Kirk, and he found himself in Tedworth Street in a tumult of the most indescribable emotions. His hand closed tightly on the hundred-pound note, and he walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER IV



WE have said that Kirk's hand closed on the hundred-pound note. But touching that note also, and jostling beside it was the sum of one shilling and tenpence halfpenny—the most of it in coppers. One shilling and tenpence halfpenny to carry him through what remained of Friday, all of Saturday and Sunday, and at least a breakfast for Monday morning. Any idea of a bed he had to put away from him. Even for food it was going to be a ticklish operation to spread a shilling and tenpence halfpenny over—how many meals? At the standard number—three a day—there were ten to be provided for. Ten, with a lunch on Monday. Nine, with no lunch on Monday. Well, say ten! One shilling and tenpence halfpenny in American money amounted to about forty-five cents, or a shade over four cents a meal!

At this rate it was possible to keep body and soul together. Not exactly lapped in luxury, perhaps, but still together. Though it was early in November the weather had not turned very cold, and to a hardy fellow like Kirk the prospect of a few nights out of doors was less dreadful than you would imagine. The safety of the hundred pounds was a much more serious consideration. What on earth was he to do with it? Where was he to hide it? Horror of horrors, suppose some of his night-hawk companions were to hold him up and rob him! That was the worst of tucking into a packing case, or prowling up some dark, riverside

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alley where barrels and lumber were apt to be found. Yet he couldn't well entrust it to anybody to keep for him. He thought of the grim young lady in the free reading room, and his heart sank. What of a police station? They'd probably think him a thief and lock him up. It wasn't a story that would be readily believed. A dirty, starving scarecrow with a hundred-pound note! No, there was no help here.

He remembered St. Stephen's church. It was a queer old place, with extraordinarily high, old-fashioned pews. When you sat down in one of them you as much disappeared from view as though you had entered an unroofed shed. It would be an easy matter to go in at some evening service, and then crouch down and hide while the others were going out. "Safe as a church!" The words had a new significance for him now. But was there any evening service—on week nights? Well, why not find out? Kirk had an indistinct recollection of a notice board with something on it about daily matins and evensong. He had wondered at the time what these unfamiliar wor's meant. Great Scott, he'd go and find out.

Later he congratulated himself on having done so. There was a service every evening at nine—"praise and prayer" it said on the board, which likewise offered him the address of the sexton in gilt letters even bigger. Kirk wandered into the graveyard, and finding it deserted, set himself to a task that had been on his mind for some little time—namely, as a precaution, to sew the one-hundred-pound note into the lining of his waistcoat. All he had to do it with was some string and his old knife, but they both served well enough to effect his purpose—though it was a clumsy job and ill disguised. Still, the note was now far safer than it had been in his pocket, and besides, no one was likely to suspect that such a poor, sloshy-footed tramp pos-

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sessed anything more than the shillings and the coppers that Kirk was quite willing to risk.

The rest of the day passed with grinding monotony. Dusk brought supper. Then more monotony, more aimless attempts to kill time, more futile walks and loiterings. To a vigorous, energetic man there is no work so hard as idleness. Not the idleness of ease, of books, of pleasant rooms, with distractions for every minute—but the hopeless, soul-depressing idleness of the streets. Kirk was thankful when at last he heard the church bell tolling, and could assure himself of his night's rest. He slunk into St. Stephen's, hoping to lose himself in the crowd, and discreetly sink out of sight in one of the box pews.

But there was no crowd. The dim, cold church was empty. The ghostly pews showed no heads above their paneled sides. Kirk hurriedly popped into one of them, and doubled himself up out of sight. The bell tolled and tolled. *Three pounds ten! Three pounds ten, three pounds ten!* Minutes passed. The bells ceased, and then the invading steps of another wayfarer were heard. Here at last was the congregation. A false hope, alas! The steps were those of the clergyman, and Kirk heard the creak of ancient boards as he mounted into the pulpit. The pulpit was very high, and placed almost in the center of the church. The clergyman, to make matters worse, was unusually tall. He took a most unsportsmanlike advantage of Kirk by rising on his toes and peering down. Kirk held his breath with apprehension, wondering if he had been detected. It almost seemed as though he had escaped. The clergyman cleared his throat, settled back on his feet, and in a high-pitched quavering voice began:

"Dearly beloved brr—*brother*—the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to——!"

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There was no good trying to make a hotel of that church. The clergyman had Kirk under constant supervision, and at the end of the service shamelessly waited for him to walk out. This Kirk did, like a dog with its tail between its legs. Very little the better, I'm afraid, for his share of that even-song. It was nearly a quarter of ten as he found himself once more treading the streets, and pitifully undecided as to where he should betake himself. He determined on the Salvation shelter. He liked the Salvationists. They could be awfully good to a man that was down on his luck. They would do something for him, he knew that. They would not turn him away.

But it was a night of misfortunes. There was an enormous crowd in the street. Policemen were everywhere. The place was all puddled up with water, and Kirk found his progress peremptorily barred.

"Stand back! Keep 'orf! No passageway 'ere!"

"What was the matter?"

"Fire!"

A bystander volunteered the information that a drunken man had set his cot in flames, and that the Salvation barracks had gone up in smoke.

"A rare sight," said the man. "You ought to have seen them ajumping from the windows! Wy, with my own heyes I saw two of them——"

Kirk turned back, sick at heart. Where was he to go? There were doubtless other Army refuges, but how was he to find them? No one could help him, though he asked repeatedly, his voice in spite of himself sinking to the key of mendicancy that warned all from him. The ever-present thought of the hundred pounds made him timorous for the first time in his life. He dreaded more than ever those cut-throat purlieus on the waterside, where shelter was most

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likely to be obtained. There seemed nothing for it but the Embankment—that wide, stately boulevard that bordered the Thames, stuck out at intervals with green benches and policemen. He had often seen people asleep on the benches. He had read allusions in the newspapers to the number of people sleeping on them. Had familiarized himself with the idea of sleeping on one of them if actually driven to it. It was well policed—that was the great thing. He knew it was well policed. Rows of police!

So he made his way to the Embankment through a network of small, dark, and confusing streets. The next trouble was to find a bench that was empty. The raw, damp weather had not thinned the ranks of the disinherited. Bench after bench was occupied, though not always by recumbent figures, however. On one a drunken woman, gabbling incoherently to herself. On another a pair of such wicked-looking hooligans taking alternative puffs of the same cigarette, that Kirk shivered for his hundred pounds till he was well passed them. It was strange what a coward this money made him. He distrusted everybody but the stalwart men in blue, who seemed to him fewer and much farther between than he had anticipated. At last he saw an empty bench, and hurried to seize it before it might be snapped up by anyone else. He was dog-tired and it was pleasant to stretch himself out at length after that long, long day. But he decided not to go to sleep. He did not dare to go asleep. Fool that he'd been not to get the address of another Army shelter. It was all the fault of that confounded church. Kirk reviled it heartily, and then had to laugh. "Dear Beloved Brother!" What a joke it would be in days to come—happier days—"from ten to a hundred thousand pounds," said Mr. Smith. A hundred thousand pounds was half a million dollars! The bench seemed suddenly less hard—the whole situation

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less miserable. Five hundred thousand dollars!—was it not worth a little discomfort!

Then he dozed off, awaking after an unknown interval to a penetrating realization of cold and achiness. He was disgusted at the treachery of his body, which had faithfully promised not to go to sleep. It had lied to him shamefully. Oh, dear, how sleepy he was! Perhaps if he sat up he could better resist these overwhelming waves of slumber. Accordingly, he sat up and blinked at the lights across the river. Blinked till no exertion of will power seemed able to keep them open. He dozed off again, dreaming in the most positive manner that he was awake—dreaming of policemen, of Mr. Smith, of lighting his pipe with a hundred-pound note.

There was a terrible weight on his chest. Bound and gagged he was lying under a ten-ton triphammer that was slowly squeezing him to death, struggle as he might. He opened his eyes, and in an instant returned to consciousness. A pair of hands were throttling his life out, while another pair were pinioning his legs. Still another hand was roving through his trousers pockets. Kirk was a powerful man—quick, cunning, and resourceful in the face of danger. He tore away the fellow from his throat, sprang over sideways, and landing a kick into something soft and human, managed to scramble to his feet. There ensued a random, indiscriminate punching. Kirk, yelling murder at the top of his lungs, staggered backward, reeling from a blow in the mouth. But even as he did so he hit out right and left, smashing one of his assailants headlong to the pavement. But the second one pressed him hard, and from behind he could hear the third, breathing violently through his teeth, and awaiting a chance to spring on him. A voice cried out: "Slug him, Bill! My Gawd! why don't you slug him?" Kirk fell

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on his knees, turned, and grabbed the fellow behind him by the legs. They both went over with a crash, twisting and writhing in a death battle. Kirk had a momentary peep at the stars—then of a hobnailed boot descending. A skinny hand was gripping his throat in a vice, while he was desperately hammering his elbow into what he hoped were human ribs. The hobnailed boot missed him by an inch, thanks to a convulsive effort that taxed every atom of his strength. The hobnailed boot rose again, aiming another vicious stamp.

"Murder, help, murder!"

Peep, peep, peep!

It was a policeman's whistle. The sound was taken up and repeated from several quarters. Elephantine footsteps approached running. But there was the hobnailed boot still smashing at him. Peep, peep, peep! He dodged it once. Dodged it twice. Peep, peep, peep!

Then oblivion.

He awoke in a sort of dormitory, the occupant of one of a long row of cots. He was extraordinarily tired, extraordinarily confused and dizzy. His eyes rested dully on the white-clad figure of a nurse. She came over to him instantly, and her kind, good face was comforting just to look at. Her voice was low and pleasant, and her hand, as she laid it on his throbbing temple, gave him a childish contentment.

"You are better?" she asked.

Kirk smiled and nodded. He felt for his head and was thunderstruck to find that he no longer had any hair. Bandages, but no hair! What the deuce had become of his hair? Why bandages? Then, with a wave of recollection the whole affair of the Embankment recurred to him.

"Nurse," he said feebly, "am I much hurt?"

She cooed over him in clotted cream English accents.

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"And the hundred pounds?" he cried out. "In Heaven's name, where is my hundred pounds?"

"You mustn't get excited?" she said, ignoring his question.

Then another thought struck him.

"What day is it?" he demanded.

"Sunday!"

He sat up in bed, greatly to her astonishment. He felt shaky and sick, but able, nevertheless, to get up and dress. He had to get up and dress.

"I'm not delirious," he said. "I had a hundred-pound note sewed up in the lining of my vest. I cannot remain here without knowing whether it is safe!"

More professional coos of the poor-dear-man-do-be-quiet order.

But the poor, dear man roared for his clothes, and raised such an outcry and hullabaloo that a doctor came running in from the next ward. He exchanged a few words with Kirk, tried ineffectually to boss him into submission, and then very grudgingly gave way.

"You're a foolhardy fellow," he said. "You've just shaved concussion of the brain. You'll come back here on a stretcher!"

"Bring me my clothes!" roared Kirk. "I haven't concussion of the brain. I want my clothes!"

A dresser arrived on the scene. Also some convalescents with brooms. Also another nurse. They formed a little group about Kirk while he still ferociously insisted on his clothes.

"Oh, well, then, get him his clothes," said the doctor.

There was an interminable delay while they were being brought. Kirk devoured some calves'-foot jelly, and fiercely repeated the tale of the hundred-pound note sewed in the

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lining of his vest. It was met by a row of incredulous faces. So incredulous, indeed, that for a moment he wondered whether the whole affair were not a dream—Mr. Smith, the house in Tedworth Street, the Desperate Enterprise—everything. Then a man appeared with the clothes. But why had they changed from blue to a dingy mustard? Kirk gazed at them in bewilderment.

"They are not mine at all!" he exclaimed. "Great Scott, those are not my clothes!"

"Yes, they are," said the man. "You can see the number for yourself—6696—just as they were stripped off you and ticketed. I ought to know, for I did it myself!"

The whole party regarded Kirk as though he were delirious. He heard something in an undertone about a "strait-jacket."

"Give me that coat," he cried defiantly. "I'll soon show you whether it's mine or not. There, can't you see it's made for a man nine sizes smaller than I am! Here, put it on."

With the air of humoring a very sick patient, the doctor held out the coat for Kirk to slip his arms into. He managed to get them in, but that was the most that could be done. Everybody laughed. It might have been a boy's, while Kirk was a broad-shouldered, deep-chested man. The absurdity of its being Kirk's coat was patent.

"Johnson, there's some mistake here," said the doctor.

"Why, I took it off him myself, sir," cried Johnson. "Look at the ticket, sir! Number 6696. The coat's all right, sir; it's the man what's changed."

Then one of the convalescents bore in.

"You've got the figures upside down," he said. "You've gone and give this poor fellow's duds to 9699!"

Johnson faltered, and muttered something under his breath.

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The doctor flushed angrily.

"Johnson, I'm going to have this thing sifted to the bottom," he cried. "And sifted here and now!"

Johnson threw up the sponge.

"It must have been that hemorrhage case yesterday," he quavered. "He did make a most awful hubbub, I remember, and went away swearing like the old Nick. But it was his ticket, and I made him take them."

"But do you know his name? Do you know where he went to? Have you got his address?"

Kirk bellowed these questions like a maniac. His eyes were flashing, and his fists closing convulsively on the coverlet.

"You'll find all that in the book," said Johnson, with lamblike meekness. "Leastways it orter be in the book. But the book not being in my department," he went on, "I really cannot positively, definitely say for certain."

"Bring the book directly," shouted the doctor. "If this matter is not cleared up instanter, I'll have you dismissed!"

Johnson slowly turned, and in a most woebegone manner walked down the ward toward the door.

"Don't get excited, dear," said the nurse to Kirk. "If you allow yourself to get excited you'll become delirious again, and have to have ice put on your poor head! Won't he, doctor?"

CHAPTER V



ABOUT three o'clock on that same Sunday afternoon, Kirk—very pale and determined—might have been seen emerging from the hospital in a suit of Mr. Johnson's own. Too short in the arms, far too ample in the waist, baggy and threadbare—these habiliments of the unfortunate Johnson hung upon Kirk with a scarecrow effect that caused the passers-by to turn and stare. In one of Mr. Johnson's pockets there rattled one shilling and eightpence (the halfpenny having unaccountably disappeared) and in another was a sheet of paper, inscribed in pencil: "Betts, Edmund George. Admitted October 18th. Advanced phthisis. Hemorrhages. Weight, 8 stone 6. Occupation, picture-frame maker. Address, 17 Henrietta Street, Soho. Discharged incurable November 3d."

Number seventeen was a small, dark shop in a mean, dark neighborhood. The window held an easel, on which, enlarged from a *carte-de-visite*, and incased in a gimcrack frame, was one of the granite-faced ancestors of the poor. On one side of this was a chromo of a Swiss lake; on the other a lady, apparently unclothed, floating limply on the bosom of an ocean. A lion, a comic motor picture, a despairing female clinging to a cross, a pair of clamps, and a key saw completed the dreary *ensemble*. Within the shop was Mr. Betts himself, a shambling, dwarfish creature, with a heavy stoop, who, beside a glue pot, and with a picture between his legs, was engaged in the active exercises of his

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profession. He raised his eyes as Kirk entered, and stared at him queerly.

"Are you named Betts?" inquired Kirk. "Edmund George Betts?"

Mr. Betts, in a surly husky tone, admitted that he was. "And wot of it?" he demanded.

"You were discharged yesterday from St. Mark's Hospital?"

Mr. Betts looked as if he would have gladly denied it. His dull, washed face, the hue of dirty plaster, took on a most forbidding expression. He seemed to apprehend what was coming, and was evidently nerving himself for a hostile interview.

"I don't see that it is any business of yours," he said. "Wot is it to you if I was?" And then he added, apparently quite at random and very belligerently: "I'm a hard-working man."

"See here, Betts," said Kirk, "you were given my clothes by mistake. Where are they? I want them!"

Mr. Betts went through with a very creditable performance of astonishment. Indignant astonishment, broken by a fit of coughing.

"I don't know wot you're talking about," he replied at last. "These are all the clothes I've got. If you don't believe they are mine, just walk across the street and arsk the tailor who made them."

There was a battle of looks. Betts's effrontery increased as he perceived Kirk's helplessness. He made stage play over the frame, and sandpapered vigorously.

"I'm going to stay here till I get my clothes," Kirk announced.

"You're crazy," said Betts.

"I tell you, I'm going to have my clothes," said Kirk.

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"There's a policeman at the end of this street," said Betts, grinning evilly. "You and he ought to know each other. If you go on bothering me, I fancy you soon will!"

Betts hammered at his frame, the master of the situation. Kirk, dizzy and ill, wondered what on earth he was to do. The creature's defiance enraged him, and yet he seemed utterly powerless. After all, it wasn't the clothes—it was the hundred-pound note he wanted. It was plainly within his power to force the restitution of his clothes. But the restitution of the note was a very different matter.

It could be denied, first of all, that he had ever possessed such a note. Secondly, it would be impossible to connect Betts with the theft of it. The sly consumptive had the whip hand of him. Was ever there anything so infuriating! Kirk gazed blankly at the glue pot, bubbling over a gas burner, and tried to think. Betts, elaborately unconcerned, measured distances with his thumb, and began to unscrew the clamps.

"There was a hundred-pound note sewed in that vest," said Kirk, "and you've got it!"

"Wot's the man talking about?" inquired Betts confidentially of a bottle of bronze solution. "First it was his clothes, and now it's his hundred-pound note! Next it will be a diamond tarara with the initials V. I.!" As he said this he gazed meaningly into the street, and again addressing the air, wondered what could be detaining Mr. Thompson, the policeman.

"He always passes about this time," he observed. "I'm looking for him every minute now. Shall call him in to see if he can't do anythink for a hard-working man, pestered by a disorderly person, who won't go away when he's told!"

Goaded beyond endurance, Kirk snatched up the pot of

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boiling glue, and seizing the fellow's collar with his left hand delivered an ultimatum.

"If you don't make a clean breast of it I'm going to pour this all over your head!"

Betts squealed and toppled backward, with Kirk on top of him. The man was as weak as a child, and his attempt to cry out brought on a fit of horrible coughing. Kirk pinned him to the floor, and threatened him with the upraised glue pot. A few drops, spilled in the struggle, trickled down the sides of the pot and fell one by one on Bett's skinny neck.

"My money! My money!" thundered Kirk, tilting the pot till his own hand scorched. "Or I swear to heaven I'll burn your face off!"

The framemaker, coughing and strangling, rolled his eyes in terror. He ceased his ineffectual struggles lest he might himself contribute to a catastrophe, gasping out something that sounded like a surrender. Kirk assisted him to sit up, and then waited sternly for the paroxysm to pass. Betts painfully regained his breath, and wiped his mouth with a dirty handkerchief.

"Now, then, where are my clothes?"

"Burnt!"

"But the note, what did you do with the note?"

Betts's eyes wandered about the shop like a hunted rat's. At last they settled dismally on the glue pot. It was a signal for Kirk to again raise it threateningly.

"Oh, my Gawd!" screamed the creature. "Don't, don't, don't!"

"Where's my money?" reiterated Kirk.

"How was I to know who it belonged to?" moaned the framemaker. "I told him they weren't my clothes, but he forced me to take them. They hung all over me, and I

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had to turn up the cuffs—yet he still insisted they were mine. At first I didn't believe it was a good note at all. I nearly took it back to the hospital. But the tailor across the way said it was a good one, and that as I was forced to take the clothes the note was lawfully mine. He said he'd cash it for me for a quid, and told me to go out and spend it fast before anybody could come down on me!"

All the fight had gone out of Betts. He was whimpering and pleading like a child. His voice scarcely rose above a whisper. He seemed to regard himself as a victim of an immense injustice. The note had been none of his own seeking; it had been thrust upon him with violence and contumely, and here now was Kirk adding insult to injury—with melted glue.

Kirk watched him as he rose and staggered to a corner of the room, where, from beneath a heap of rubbish he drew out a paper bag.

"Here's all that's left of it," he said. "I don't know how much I've spent—and the tailor he got a pound."

Kirk emptied out a mass of notes, gold, and silver, and feverishly set himself to count them. Betts looked on with an air of nervous detachment, and attempted to disarm criticism by retelling the whole story. It buzzed mournfully in Kirk's ears as he stacked sovereigns in fives, ranged the notes, and vaguely forecasted the shortage. His face grew so ominous that Betts felt in his pockets, and cascaded the contents of his purse into a heap. With this addition the whole reached ninety-one pounds eighteen shillings and fourpence.

Betts had to account for a little more than eight pounds!

Kirk stuck the money into his pocket and imperiously ordered Betts to make up the difference.

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"Oh, my Gawd!" exclaimed Betts with unaffected sincerity. "I haven't a bob in the world!"

"Then you'll have to sell something," said Kirk, grinding his teeth. "You owe me eight pounds, one, and eightpence, and by George, I'm going to have it!"

"You can't get blood out of a stone," protested Betts, shrinking from him in terror. "I've been five weeks in hospital—the whole stock ain't worth over twenty pounds—you can see that for yourself—and the most of it's owed for. Why, I haven't even a bed to sleep on. All up the spout, every end and stick of it!"

"You must have got something for that eight pounds?"

Betts produced a post-office receipt for five pounds.

"I sent this to my wife down at Wapping," he said. "She and the two kids are staying with their mother, who's a lodging-house keeper in a poor way. A quid for the tailor makes six. The rest just slipped through my fingers—like money will when you're flush of it!"

Kirk groaned as he perceived the uselessness of attempting to regain another penny. Mr. Betts snuffled audibly, and murmured something about having been honest brought up, and always able to look the world in the face.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said at last. "I'll write you out a paper, promising to make up the balance on weekly installments of seven and sixpence!"

Kirk brushed the suggestion aside. To-morrow would be Monday, the day on which he was pledged to return to 82 Tedworth Street with the hundred-pound note intact. Weekly installments of seven and sixpence were too derisive to be entertained for an instant. He had a fleeting notion of extracting that pound from the rascally tailor, and then as quickly resigned it. What even was another pound? He

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felt dizzy and ill, and in no state for a further drain on his energies. Somehow or other he had to raise eight pounds by the next afternoon, or forego any share in Mr. Smith's desperate enterprise. He had to think, and think hard, and must needs pull himself together. Nothing of the kind was possible in that stuffy, little workshop, with its penetrating smell of glue, squalor, and disease. An uncontrollable disgust overwhelmed him. Without another word he passed out into the street, and hastened away, asking himself miserably what on earth he was to do.

He was tempted to seek out Mr. Smith and throw himself on his mercy. Mr. Smith surely could not blame him for such a terrible train of accidents. But then Mr. Smith mightn't believe him. Besides, too, the latter's warning had been so explicit. Kirk remembered the upraised finger, and the serious, almost cynical voice. Mr. Smith had been more than prepared for his backsliding. With all his appearance of easy good nature, there was a streak of iron in that man. Kirk could almost hear the interview in imagination; the urbanity, the sympathy—and the door! No, he did not dare make the attempt. If it was to be made at all it must be as the last resort. There were still eighteen hours before him in which to raise the deficit. Surely in a city of six million inhabitants it was possible to find or borrow or beg eight pounds!

He followed street after street at random. Money, money, money everywhere—in banks, in shuttered shops, in the pockets of well-dressed people. Money strolling! Money driving rapidly past in hansom cabs. Money nonchalantly leaving clubs or standing undecidedly on the steps of magnificent hotels. Eight pounds! Eight pounds! Oh, the mockery of this affluence on every side—this ocean in which he had not a drop to drink! He was glau to strike

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across meaner neighborhoods where there was less to agonize him. He was hardly able to drag his feet along. Never had he been so tired—so utterly exhausted.

His head swam, and it was only by indomitable resolution that he could put temptation by him—the temptation to enter the first likely hotel; eat, bathe, sleep, and ignobly surrender to his physical needs, resigning all idea of getting the eight pounds, resigning all hope of sharing in that desperate enterprise, acquiescing in defeat, and accepting it as inevitable. But no, no, no, he would not give in! He would rest in the free reading room, whip up his jaded faculties, and somehow or other find a way out.

For an hour he sat apathetic in his chair. Dusk fell, the lights were lit, and still he was not one whit nearer the eight pounds. Then, in the queer, unexpected way that such things happen, he began to get a glimmer of an idea. An idea necessitating a three-week-old number of the *Sporting and Dramatic Record*. He found it with difficulty, and rapidly turning over the pages, at length laid his finger on what he sought.

It was an interview with Homer Kittredge, the literary lion of the hour. Homer Kittredge, that astounding young man who had taken London by storm with his South African stories. Kirk, also, had been taken by storm, and cherished a tremendous admiration for the great author—so much so, indeed, that he had previously read the interview with avidity and remembered it well. Here it was, portrait and all—Kittredge's lodgings, Kittredge's modesty, Kittredge's breakfast, Kittredge's views on things in general. The interview was flippant and silly, but all the same it represented Kittredge in a delightful light—broad, tolerant, generous, and human. Kittredge had been induced to talk of his early struggles, of his bitter fight with poverty, of his

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walking through the streets, just as Kirk had done, trying to keep his hands from snatching at diamond stickpins. It was humorously expressed—it was laughable, and intended to be so—but it gave Kirk an extraordinary fellow-feeling with the novelist—a friendship, a tenderness. Here, best of all, was the astounding young man's address: 11 Rye Row, Charing Cross.

Half an hour later Kirk descended from a hansom and found himself in a dirty little side street off one of the greatest thoroughfares of London. The house before him was as dirty and unprepossessing as the street it fronted on. Kirk remembered that Kittredge was busy on a novel dealing with low life in London, and this explained his choice of a slum to live in. He was breathing the same air as his characters, and could gaze down on their heads from his second-story window. It showed what a thorough fellow Kittredge was, and proved his determination to get down to brass tacks. But even conceding all this it seemed a strange abode for a man who had the whole of London at his feet, and the general aspect of grime and poverty fell like a chill on Kirk's eager hopes. Now that the die was about to be cast he discovered that his courage was all gone, and as he knocked he trembled. A slatternly girl opened the door. She listened with contempt to Kirk's request to see Mr. Kittredge. He spoke low and pleadingly, and at once confirmed the suspicions engendered by his disreputable clothes and haggard, unshaven face.

"No beggars!" she exclaimed, and would have slammed the door in his face had he not, with surprising presence of mind, stuck in his sloppy boot to prevent her. She kicked at it viciously from within. Kirk rapped loudly on the panel, and expostulated fiercely. The young woman screamed. A crowd sprang up from nowhere. Inside the house heavy

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footsteps could be heard descending the stairs two steps at a time, hastening to the defense.

The door was flung wide open, and Kirk saw before him a bristly haired, broad-shouldered, very angry young man in gold spectacles.

"What's all this?" he demanded, with the glitter of battle in his eyes. "What do you mean by sticking your foot in my door?"

"I want to see Mr. Kittredge."

"I'm Mr. Kittredge!"

Kirk faltered. The words he meant to say died on his lips. He was silent.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" cried the novelist. "A big, sturdy man like you begging! I won't give you a penny, and if you don't clear out I'll punch your head!"

Kirk did not budge. His white face, his evident distress, the glisten of real tears in his eyes—all struck the novelist with a sudden contrition.

"Oh, well, here's a shilling!" he cried. "Take it, and get!"

Kirk, in a broken voice, refused the alms.

"Mr. Kittredge," he said, "it is true I am a beggar—but not that kind of beggar. Look here!" and with that he plumped his hand in his pocket, and drew it out brimming with gold.

The sight staggered Homer Kittredge. His face changed to an extraordinary interest. Still holding the shilling he studied Kirk from top to toe, his amazement increasing as he contrasted the latter's disheveled and unkempt appearance with the shining sovereigns.

"Then what do you want?" he demanded at last.

"Eight pounds," said Kirk.

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"But, my dear fellow, why in Heaven's name should I give you eight pounds?"

"If you'll let me come in I'll tell you why," said Kirk.

"Oh, Mr. Kittredge, please let me come in!"

The great writer still stared at him. He seemed at a loss to know how to answer. The master of imaginary romances stood spellbound before the real thing.

"All right—come along," he said. "I won't promise you eight pounds, but I'll give you ten minutes of my time. Mind the step, old fellow!"

And thus invited, Kirk followed Homer Kittredge into the dark and uninviting passage.

CHAPTER VI



E was led upstairs and ushered into an attractively furnished room. At one end, sparkling in the light of the open fire, was a trophy of arms—rifles, bayonets, Oriental daggers, etc. On the warmly tinted walls hung reproductions of Détaillé—dashing war pictures, full of movement, color, and red legs. Limp red legs lying dead on gray village streets; vigorous red legs, astride of horses, intercepting Uhlans; weary but heroic red legs, covering the retreat of dusty columns; dejected red legs, cutting the regimental colors into pieces before surrender. There were two tables in the room. One littered with manuscript, cigar stumps, books, and newspapers; the other spread for a solitary dinner that Kirk had evidently interrupted.

"Hungry?" inquired the novelist, picking his napkin off the floor, and briskly seating himself.

"Yes——"

"Well, then sit down. Beer?"

"Oh, Mr. Kittredge, I did not mean to——"

"Hold your tongue," said the novelist cheerfully. "Skip gratitude and all that, and get yourself one of those mugs off the mantelpiece." As Kirk obeyed he carved a slice off the roast, and apologized for offering it to him on a bread-plate.

"But I dare say you won't mind," he added.

The two men smiled at each other across the table.

Kittredge flourished his mug.

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"Now, my handsome tramp," he cried, with ambiguous geniality, "let's drink to our better acquaintance, and try not to tell me any more lies than you can help. Murderer, thief, blackmailer, felon—and you may throw yourself fearlessly on my breast—for it's my business to get behind the scenes of life, and right down to the heart of things. I will keep your secret, and hose you down with good advice. But if you insist on feats of imagination, and think to fool me with a penny novelette—I warn you that I'm an impatient man, and ill to deal with. Truth I love; fiction I can do for myself, and probably better than you. Horseradish?"

Kirk listened unruffled to this extraordinary speech. He was in a state of delicious contentment, and all his cares and miseries seemed at an end. He drank his beer, devoured his beef, put away countless squares of bread, smiling like a child whenever he met those restless black eyes that fixed themselves so constantly on his. His attitude plainly puzzled Kittredge, who, in spite of his better judgment, felt strongly attracted toward his strange guest, and inclined to believe in him.

"You are a slow fellow in coming to the point," he ventured at last.

"I'm afraid to," said Kirk. "Nobody in the whole world ever needed eight pounds more than I do. While I sit here, eating your excellent dinner, I can tell myself the fairy tale that you will give it to me, and feel comfortable and safe."

"But why eight pounds?" asked Kittredge. "It's an unusual kind of sum. A chap that would give you eight would just as readily give you ten!"

Kirk emptied his pockets on the tablecloth, building up a little pile of gold, notes, silver, and coppers.

"I have to make that a hundred," he said. "I don't

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care if it isn't a penny over. But one penny less, and I'll almost go mad with disappointment. If by to-morrow afternoon I don't have a hundred-pound note to show to a certain person, I forfeit all chances to a hundred thousand!"

"A hundred thousand!" exclaimed Kittredge incredulously. "Now, see here, do you think I'm going to swallow all that?"

Kirk was abashed by his rough and jeering tone.

"Perhaps only ten thousand," he said hurriedly. "It's all very mysterious, Mr. Kittredge. I'll—I'll tell you about it, and then you can judge for yourself."

This he forthwith proceeded to do. Kittredge lit a cigar and listened, his keen, mobile face constantly changing its expression as Kirk took up the thread of his narrative from the time he arrived in London, down to his encounter with Mr. Betts. From time to time Kittredge put a question, always rather sharply, and then with a wave of his cigar bade Kirk continue. His interest was manifest, and once or twice, in a curt, illuminating way he helped Kirk out as the latter was at a loss for the right word. In the middle of it all the girl came in to clear the table. Kittredge ordered her to leave the room and, rising, locked the door, and then resumed his seat, checking a facetious remark of Kirk's with an impulsive, "Go on, go on—never mind that!"

At the end of his story, carried to the novelist's very threshold, Kirk reached over for a cigar, and waited for his companion to speak. He hardly knew what to expect, and his uncertainty was not relieved by Kittredge springing to his feet, and striding about the room, exclaiming, "By Jove! By Jove!" excitedly under his breath.

Then he returned and, leaning over Kirk, said he'd give a thousand pounds to change places with him.

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"To think I was grubbing here while things like that were going on under my nose! That's the worst of us writers—we dream of romance while fellows like you, confound you, are doing it—living it—eating and drinking and sleeping with it! It's a shame that I should be getting this second-hand. I ought to have been there myself. I wonder if it's too late? You ask them when you go back. Don't tell them it's me—but just say a friend, and put it in hot. Will you, old man? I mean it, truly! I'd chuck this to-morrow on the bare chance. Oh, Lordy, why don't I read my *Times*!"

Kirk timidly brought up the subject of the eight pounds.

"Eight pounds!" cried the novelist, stamping about the room again. "Bet your boots I will. Only you must come back and tell me all about it. That's the bargain, Kirkpatrick. You owe it to me, you know. You'll be a cur if you don't. There are more stories in this old town than I ever found in Africa, and, by George, I think you and I have got a big one by the tail!"

Kirk was too overcome to speak. The friendship, the sympathy, above everything else the assurance of the eight pounds, fired his brain and set his pulses dancing. His wildest hopes had not soared so high. He had never anticipated that his story would carry Kittredge away in this headlong fashion. The reaction left him sick and giddy. An hysterical gayety possessed him. He found himself shaking Kittredge's hand and vowing eternal brotherhood. The spectacles glimmered and shone through clouds of tobacco smoke; the impetuous voice rose in a crescendo. It seemed he was a man after Kittredge's own heart; that Kittredge, indeed, was just such another; that life was the real thing, my boy, and books the wretched substitute—diabetic make-believes, so to speak, for the crusty, wholesome loaf

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that real men crave. They toasted each other in beer, smoking furiously.

Kirk gradually recovered something of his composure.

"Frankly, Mr. Kittredge," he said at last, "what do you suppose it all means?"

Kittredge shook his head.

"I haven't the faintest idea," he returned. "But in the general mystery several things stand out. These people have money—a very great deal of money, apparently, to judge from the way they rent houses and throw about hundred-pound notes. Secondly, their system is admirably devised. It implies an unusual knowledge of human nature. They're getting together a body of men who will go anywhere and dare anything. They are drawing on the real desperate class—men of tried courage and character, with nothing to lose—nothing but their lives, and you and I know how cheap lives are held with that sort. Thirdly, the adventure is admittedly hazardous. Your Mr. Smith told you that himself; even laid it on a bit; showed an evident willingness to scare off the weaklings."

"Well?" asked Kirk, as the novelist paused.

"It must be something of the freebooting order," Kittredge resumed. "Finnish revolution, gun-running in Hayti, perhaps some African mix-up of the Rajah Brooke description. It wouldn't surprise me if your friends were to carve out a kingdom somewhere *à la Pizarro*. In some ways it is easier to-day than it ever was before. The map isn't at all so securely tinted as some people believe. Why should not one of our enormously rich men strike out on the good old-fashioned lines of personal leadership? Give me five million pounds, and I could take my choice of twenty savage kingdoms. The two-party system exists everywhere, old man, and all you need to do is to swing one of them!



“‘That’s the bargain, Kirkpatrick.’”

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That's how Cortez got Mexico. Turn the scale, that's all. Throw in your weight with the opposition, and stiffen them up with money and guns. That's been politics from the year one. Maximilian tried it, too, and would have won in a canter if you Americans hadn't fought him under the rose. Uncle Sam was too strong for him—but, my stars, it wasn't the Mexicans!'

An hour ran by as they sat and talked and speculated on this fascinating subject. Kittredge got down an atlas, and ran his thumb over many a potential conquest. The process of putting two and two together was endlessly repeated. Mr. Smith's chance expressions were weighed, argued over, and minutely analyzed. They groped for hidden meanings, for clues. Kirk had to repeat the whole story, with slow and elaborate details. He was made to give Mr. Smith's intonations, his very manner as he said this or that. The doctor, too, was put under a microscope. Kittredge was a veritable literary bloodhound. Give him an old boot, or a discarded hat, and he could pursue a trail indefinitely. Pursue—but alas, never to reach anywhere. At last he had to admit that the problem was insoluble. They had not enough to go on. Nothing but conjecture, conjecture, conjecture, racking to the brain, but accomplishing nothing.

Suddenly the novelist looked up at the clock.

"By Jove, I must get back to work!" he exclaimed. "All this put it clean out of my head. I have two chapters to finish! You won't mind, will you?"

Kirk rose apologetically, thinking that he was dismissed.

"Oh, no, no!" said Kittredge. "I tell you what. Go into my room there, and shave and have a bath and get into that purple dressing gown some tomfool admirer sent me last week. Then lie down on the sofa here, and make

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yourself comfortable till I've finished. Then I'll make up some kind of bed for you on the floor."

Kirk felt bound to protest a little. He hated to be in the way and said so. He would return in the morning. He wouldn't presume any further on Mr. Kittredge's kindness. But Mr. Kittredge's answer was a good-natured oath.

"Do what you're told and keep quiet," he said with charming brutality. "Get out, do you hear, and don't bother me. Open your head again, and I'll throw a bootjack at you. Skedaddle!"

Thus expedited, Kirk went into the bedroom, and obeyed his directions to the letter. Oh, how good it was to take off that two-days' beard, to slop and splash in the wash basin, to lie his length in the bath and feel a delicious lassitude steal over him! He dawdled luxuriously, enjoying to the full every stage of his toilet, and tiptoed about so as to make as little noise as possible. His mind was relieved of all its worries. No longer did the nightmare of that eight pounds rise and daunt him. He had got it! Wonder of wonders, he had got it! And had not only got it, but had found a friend also—Homer Kittredge, the most dominant figure in London at that moment! How good the world was, to be sure! What good hearts it held, what generosity and kindness! His hands were reverent of the combs and brushes, the towels, the shaving mug. They were Kittredge's, and he touched them respectfully because they were Kittredge's. On the dresser was a gold watch, a lumpy purse, a jeweled knife. There was nothing to prevent him from putting them in his pocket and bolting. Such trust in him made his breast heave. This was what had made Kittredge great—his knowledge of men. You could be ragged and dirty and unkempt, but those eyes could see the soul beneath, and find honor and uprightness within. Had Kirk been an Oriental

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he would have knelt down and kissed every one of those eight pairs of boots that were arranged so neatly against the wall. Being a white man, and unused to such practical manifestations of regard, he could only murmur in a broken voice: "God bless him! God bless him!" And hope in days to come he might be able to prove his gratitude.

The purple dressing gown was lying across the back of a chair. It was gorgeously embroidered with gold thread, and lined inside with watered silk. It had a brilliant, new look, as though the novelist himself had been at arraying himself in such Arabian dress. Kirk, however, preferred to treat it as an *objet d'art*. With eager anticipation, he got into the lordly garment, and buttoned it about his waist. He would have vastly preferred a turban, but orders were orders, and he was only a man. Kirk had hidden him. He returned to the study room, expecting to be greeted with a shout of laughter. But Kittredge was head-down in his writing, and oblivious to everything but his work. Kirk laid down on the sofa, and little by little dozed off in sleep.

At intervals during the night he awoke, wondering and bewildered at the strangeness of his surroundings. His sleepy eyes would settle themselves on that black head so intently bent over the paper, and his sleepy ears would listen to the racing of the pen. Half hidden in a cloud of tobacco smoke, and impelled by an ungovernable fury of creative effort, Kittredge was performing one of his prodigious, regardless of time or jaded nature. As a page was finished he flung it to the floor, and with a snatch at the ink bottle began again on the fresh sheet. The extraordinary energy and concentration of this performance hypnotized Kirk. The rain of paper, the scratch, scratch, scratch of the pen, the bent and determined shoulders as fixed as a statue's—all

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followed him into his dreams, so that asleep or awake there always was Kittredge, indomitably toiling into the small hours. The scene varied—now it was Arorai, now it was the cabin of a ship, now it was Radnor Street—but wherever it was there also was Kittredge, doubled over his desk, writing, writing, writing.

He never knew at what advanced hour the novelist had finally tired and gone to bed. It was morning when Kirk awoke for the last time and found himself alone. A gray, dark morning, mournfully brought to his attention by the strains of a grind-organ in the streets below. Over him was a blanket that he had no recollection of—another proof of Kittredge's thoughtfulness. He sat up and looked at the clock, thunderstruck to find that it was after nine. Beside the sofa were his clothes in a tumbled heap, surmounted by a little note, and nine pounds in sovereigns.

"I am dog-tired, and will ask you to please not disturb me. Here's a pound over, with my blessing. Come back to-morrow and let me know all about it.—H. K."

Kirk dressed himself, feeling delightfully rested and invigorated. That extra pound was a Godsend, and would put him on velvet. He would treat himself to a capital breakfast and get into fine trim for his afternoon's appointment. Great Scott! though, what a narrow shave it had been! The thought made him shiver—as a man shivers when he recalls some frightful accident that he has lately escaped. It is always more terrifying in the retrospect than at the time. One needs a little leisure to become properly panic-stricken. And with the shiver was a gloating sense of safety, of everything having come out right, of a heart no longer burdened and oppressed. All about him on the floor

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were those scribbled sheets. He stepped carefully in order to avoid them. Some day he would read them in a book, and Kittredge would remind him when and where they had been written. How they would laugh and talk, the pair of them! What a privilege it was to know such a man! The greatest man in England, and—Kirk's friend! It was a happy augury for the desperate enterprise that it had already brought him this! He smoothed out the dressing gown and wondered how he'd ever dared to wear it. It shone richly in the daylight, and fell into lustrous folds as he assisted it to a chair. A present from a duchess, probably. Well, wait a bit, and he'd make Kittredge presents, too! A gold-topped dressing case, perhaps, or a penholder encrusted with diamonds! Nothing would be too good for Kittredge. He wouldn't mind if it cost him a thousand pounds. He had to get even somehow, though all the money in the world would leave him still a debtor. Kittredge had saved him. Kittredge had pulled him out of hell!

He wrote a few lines of farewell and hung the missive from the chandelier. But he could not bear to go without another look at his benefactor. He peeped in the darkened bedroom, and glanced at the recumbent figure beneath the covers. Only a black head showed, and one muscular arm flung out in the abandonment of slumber. He would have liked to shake that hand before departing—to blurt out his thanks, his gratitude. It gave him a pang to go like this, without one word. Well, his little note would have to say it for him! He stealthily shut the door, and made his way out of the house, stopping in the street to look up at the windows of Kittredge's room.

What amazing things had happened since last he had stood there only a few short hours before!

He took breakfast in a quiet little coffee room, smoked

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his pipe, and waited for the banks to open. There didn't seem to be any in this neighborhood, and he had quite a long search to find one. It was an imposing structure, with marble steps and a uniformed doorkeeper. Kirk directed himself to the cashier's wicket, and confidently laid down an exact hundred pounds that he had previously counted. He was smiling with satisfaction, and in the exuberance of his feelings wished the cashier good morning.

"I should be very much obliged if you could let me have a hundred-pound note," he said.

The cashier, a fastidiously well-dressed young man, eyed him superciliously, and in a drawling voice, the acme of refined insolence, asked him if he were a customer of the bank?

"Why, no," returned Kirk, conscious for the first time that his appearance was against him. "But I hope that——"

"Can't do it," said the cashier languidly, turning on Kirk the back of a faultlessly fitting coat.

Kirk explained civilly that he was a stranger, and that it was a matter of urgent importance; that it would be a favor on the part of the supercilious young man to oblige him.

"Can't do it," snapped the cashier, laying a caressing hand on a tray of gold. "We deal only with customers!"

This put a new idea into Kirk's head.

"How does one become a customer?" he asked, thinking he might pay in a hundred at one end and draw it out at the other—an ingenious stratagem, possibly open to criticism, but unavoidably forced upon him. No doubt the process would take a little time. But what was time! He had oceans of time! And it would teach that hide-bound old bank not to trifle with Americans.

But he had failed to count on the conservatism of British institutions.

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"You must be introduced by another customer," drawled the cashier.

Kirk left the bank and sought another. This was a much less pretentious place—no lordling here behind the wicket, but a careworn man in a shabby alpaca coat. Kirk laid down his money, and with all the ingratiating he could muster begged permission to exchange it for a hundred-pound note.

The careworn man was unexpectedly polite. Without actually committing himself as to the note, he engaged Kirk in a friendly conversation, smiling and smirking in the most unaccountable manner. Kirk thought his behavior peculiar, but hiding his surprise, tried to sustain his side of the conversation and acquit himself no less handsomely. The agreeable fiction was suddenly disturbed, however, by the arrival of the bank manager behind the bars. This individual eyed him sharply, exposing to view as he did so a printed broadside headed: "Scotland Yard, Warning to Bankers."

"Wrong man," said the manager. "Too tall for Tiltottson—no scar under the left eye—nose doesn't correspond. What kind of a game is he trying to work on you?"

"Says he wishes a hundred-pound note for this, sir."

The manager looked suspiciously at the pile of money, and taking up one of the gold pieces rang it on the counter. Then he sampled one of Kirk's five-pound notes.

"Tell him to go away," said the manager to the cashier, as though he were too proud to address Kirk personally, and preferred this regal indirectness. "Tell him to go away directly."

"Go away!" repeated the cashier.

Then Kirk, gathering up his money, forthwith retired from that temple of Mammon. He tried another, and another. He was repulsed everywhere. His attempt to change

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his money into a hundred-pound note was regarded as darkly nefarious. The trick wasn't apparent on the face of it, but one look at him seemed sufficient to arouse the banking interest to the enormity of his demand. Scarecrow figures like himself had no legitimate business with hundred-pound notes. He was dismissed with varying shades of incivility—from the icy-polite to the frankly insolent.

After three hours of this kind of thing Kirk began to lose heart. It was already past noon, and he had little time to lose. He decided on a new plan of operations, and sought out the money-changing kiosk in the yard of Charing Cross station. Taking the bull by the horns, he described his unavailing effort to get a hundred-pound note, and offered the man a premium of ten shillings to enlist his interest. He had been so repeatedly rebuffed that his manner in spite of himself, had lost all its assurance. Thief and impostor was stamped all over him. He made his request with such a hang-doggish air that it would have been a bold man who would have entrusted him with threepence.

"But what do you want it for?" demanded the man, rigid with suspicion.

Kirk's explanations were very lame. After a certain amount of hemming and hawing, it occurred to him to make capital out of his misfortune.

"None of the banks will take my money on deposit unless I'm introduced," he said. "I can't go around like this, carrying all this stuff loose in my pocket, now can I? But I could sew a hundred-pound note in my clothes, don't you see?"

"Oh, if it's only to deposit," exclaimed the man, "we can accommodate you very easily. We pay three per cent on short terms and four on longer. Why didn't you say that at once, and save trouble?"

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Kirk was handed a form to fill out, and was further obliged with a stylographic pen!

This was a facer indeed. His own petard was hoisting him with a vengeance. He feebly explained that he would prefer to take the note. That he would willingly pay fifteen shillings premium. That the likelihood of his leaving England at short notice rendered the note almost a necessity.

"Then we'll give you notes of the country you're going to," said the man, with diabolical helpfulness. "East or west, north or south, in kroners, dollars, thalers, francs, marks, pesetas—we pride ourselves in doing the biggest money-changing business in London."

"I'd rather have a hundred pounds in English money," quavered Kirk.

"Well, we can manage that, too," said the man, going to a drawer. "Here's a fifty, two tens——"

"But I want it all in one note," persisted Kirk. "It's no good to me if it isn't in one note. I want a hundred-pound note!"

The money changer's long-suffering patience exploded. We shall not go into what he said, nor how he said it. Kirk retired at the first volley, and, to complete the military metaphor, fled in disorder. There was nothing for it but to return to Kittredge, and again appeal to the novelist's sympathy. Fool that he had been not to do it sooner, and thus spare himself hours of humiliation. Kittredge, besides, was close at hand. Rye Row was only three minutes away. He hated to bother Kittredge any more, but in the words of the proverb, "needs must when the devil drives!"

A little later he was knocking at the well-remembered door. The same little servant let him in. Port at last, thank Heaven!

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"May I see Mr. Kittredge? Go up and tell him it is Lewis Kirkpatrick on most urgent business!"

"I'm sorry," said the little maid, "but Mr. Kittredge was called away most unexpectedly at ten o'clock."

"But when will he be back?"

Kirk's heart was in his throat, and a terrible consternation beset him.

"Can't say," said the girl. "He didn't seem to know himself. It was down in Surrey somewhere."

"Down in Surrey somewhere!" repeated Kirk. "Do you mean to tell me he left no address?"

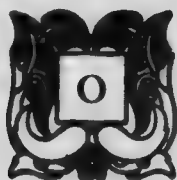
"Oh, no!" said the girl. "He never leaves his address. Mr. Kittredge is a very queer gentleman. He comes and he goes—it may be a day, it may be a week. Often in the morning I take the tray up to him, and he ain't there! Yes, a very queer gentleman! Do you wish to leave a message in case he should come back?"

"I think not," groaned Kirk. "Indeed, don't know what to do. I'll come back later. Yes, I'll come back later!"

The girl watched him curiously as he turned and walked away.

"Poor fellow," she said to herself. "I'm sorry I didn't offer him a piece of cold meat. He's a nice-spoken gentleman in spite of his clothes, and his face is fair pitiful. Oh, dear, dear, what a hard world it is, to be sure!"

CHAPTER VII



F all Kirk's vicissitudes, this seemed to him the worst. The weight of his pocket, heavy with gold, mocked him at every step. A myriad of clocks warned him that the precious moments were slipping by, and that his appointment at 82 Tedworth Street was in jeopardy. It was already after one, and although "afternoon" is an elastic term, no amount of stretching could make it include to-morrow and the day after. Six o'clock would spell the knell of his hopes. And the exasperating thing was that he had his hundred pounds safe and clinking under his hand! But for Mr. Smith's absurd proviso he might jump into the first hansom and keep his appointment and his word. But it had to be a note—a hundred-pound note! Oh, good Lord, what was he to do—what was he to do? He might appeal to the American consul. He might lay his plight before one of those rich Americans that can always be found in London. But this meant delay, and, worse still, precluded him from hanging about Rye Row on the chance of Kittredge returning unexpectedly. Of all the alternatives before him the safest and the surest was to camp on the novelist's doorstep.

It was possible, indeed, that Mr. Smith might be less exacting about the appointment than the note. He had laid no particular stress on the appointment. The test of character was the return of the hundred-pound note intact. A little delay might easily be accounted for. No delay could

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be as damning as the absence of the note. Even if he were a day—two days—late, he need not absolutely despair. Such were Kirk's reflections as he strolled miserably along, attempting to put a brave face on the matter. But nothing could stifle the inner voice that said all was lost. It persisted drearily, and called his attention to the fact that the afternoon was waning. It shattered the trumpery artifices with which he tried to console himself. Yes, all was lost!

Then, in a kind of panic, he hurriedly retraced his steps. It was crazy thus to abandon Rye Row, and wander away from his one possible salvation. He must station himself near Kittredge's door and await the novelist's return. It would be a forlorn business, and depressing alike to body and soul, but he couldn't see that there was anything else to do. He loitered about the street for an hour, occasionally resting on a doorstep. Whenever he attracted too much attention he would move on, stop at the end of the street, and forlornly search for a new coign of vantage. A busy world looks askance at the loafer, and instinctively gives him a wide berth. A shabby, pale man with nothing to do except to prowl pertinaciously up and down an honest street! Embryo criminal! Area sneak-thief! Keep the chain on the door, Mary!

Kirk's first shame gave way to a brazen indifference. Let them stare and cackle; let them think the worst of him; let them take in the canary and the doormat! He was too tired to care. He would sit on their doorsteps and passively defy them. When ordered off one he would choose the next, and so on, if need be, all round the street! But it was weary work. The steps were hard. The monotony grinding. The day without an end. At last, determined to set up an establishment of his own, and be beholden to no one, he made his way to a shop he remembered having passed previously, and

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bought a second-hand camp stool for one and eightpence. A further outlay of fourpence halfpenny made him the possessor of "Zanoni," by Bulwer Lytton. Thus equipped, he returned to Rye Row, and preëmpted a bit of pavement opposite number eleven.

This new departure roused Rye Row to a perfect frenzy of curiosity. All the children of the neighborhood grouped themselves about him. Grown-ups emerged from houses and forced their way up to him, breathing on his neck, and reading snippets of "Zanoni" over his shoulder. There was a general consensus that he was mad, and might go off any moment in a homicidal mania. And while he read and read, they speculated audibly on his personal appearance—on the fact that he seemed also deaf and dumb, on the misfortune that he should have chosen their row as the scene of his sinister activities. The climax was reached when the little housemaid in Kittredge's house came over to him with what she called a "sangwich." He sheepishly ate his "sangwich" while everyone looked on as though he were a monkey in a zoo. The insiders stared unblinkingly; the outsiders giggled and shoved. The passers-by took him for an evangelist, and those who had the time and inclination waited to join in the hymn.

The individuals changed, but the crowd remained. The slow hours dragged along, dusk came, the lamplighter had made his rounds, and still there was no Kittredge to repay our poor friend for his martyrdom. But night brought relief from persecution and a friend. The little housemaid, after a battle with her mother, had won a grudging consent that Kirk should be allowed to bring his stool into the area-way of number eleven. It was a most welcome concession, and bringing with it another "sangwich," proved to be a double boon. Here in a dark corner he camped the rest of the

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evening, shivering in the raw air like a vagrant dog. But the evening was as profitless as the afternoon, and by eleven o'clock Kirk folded up his stool, stuck "Zanoni" in his pocket, and stretching his cramped limbs, directed himself to find a shelter for the night. A cabman offered to drive him to a place where he could get a good comfortable shake-down for a shilling. Kirk accepted his proposal with alacrity, and, after a short drive, found himself in the cabman's own home and the guest of his "Missis."

It was a good enough room, and the people looked honest. Kirk locked his door, and dragging a heavy chest of drawers against it, tumbled into bed. The long, long day was over, with all its disappointments, its weariness, its vanished hopes. Kirk closed his eyes, and floated into a better country: a country where there was none to mock or gibe; a country in which hundred-pound notes were unknown and banks existed not—to a merciful oblivion that gives us strength for another day, and the courage to suffer and endure.

The next day, after a hurried breakfast, Kirk again sought his post. Kittredge had not returned, nor was there any word from him. To an interminable Monday Kirk had now to add an interminable Tuesday. But there were now alleviations that he had not enjoyed the day before. The privilege of the area gave him seclusion. He could read his book in peace, and smoke his pipe in undisturbed comfort. "The time of day," as it was called, could be exchanged with the little housemaid, and with the little housemaid's dragon mother. The vagrant dog got a few pats on the head, and was discovered to be well-mannered and grateful. Kirk was given a slip of carpet to rest his feet on, not to speak of Mr. Kittredge's morning paper to read. His sad air, his dilapidated appearance, his mournful

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eyes, attracted a sympathetic attention. The little housemaid became as eager as he for Kittredge to return, which, with the positiveness of female intuition, she declared was now surely close at hand.

But alas for intuition! The morning went, and no Kittredge. Noon came, and no Kittredge. Two, three, four, five o'clock, and still no Kittredge. The short, wintry afternoon merged itself into shadow, and the lighted lamp showed a figure on a camp stool, sunk like a Christian martyr in a stone cell, waiting spectrally for the writer to return. It was seen to dine on a "sangwich." It was seen to comfort itself with a pipe. It was seen to refuse an umbrella from the little housemaid, and overheard to say that it didn't mind the drizzle. Bodily ills had lost all power to hurt. It was the mind that suffered from the hammer, hammer, hammer of one idea incessantly repeated. Oh, that Kittredge would come! Oh, that Kittredge would come!

Night found Kirk again an inmate of the cabman's. The hopelessness and desperation of his position kept sleep at bay. What if Wednesday came and there was still no Kittredge? Was he to wait with folded hands while Mr. Smith hoisted anchor and sailed away without him? Would it not be better to go straight to Mr. Smith and tell him everything? Test of character, indeed! Was he not perhaps holding too slavishly to the letter of the law, while as a matter of fact he had more than fulfilled the spirit? He had his hundred pounds to show. Friendless, penniless, and ragged, he had put up a terrific fight, and had emerged triumphant. Surely this would count in his favor? Ought it not to count even more than if he had tamely stuck to his note, and as tamely had returned it? But it would be hard to gloss over the Kittredge episode to Mr. Smith. The eight pounds thus gained had been at the cost of letting Kittredge into the



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secret. Of course Kittredge was as true as steel. He could trust Kittredge implicitly. But Mr. Smith might regard it very differently. "Above everything, able to hold their tongues," ran the advertisement. It was conceivable that Mr. Smith might consider this a more serious dereliction than the actual loss of the note and the subsequent shortage. Had he not, perhaps, been an awful fool to try and make up that eight pounds at all? Would it not have been wiser to go to Mr. Smith direct?

Who could say? It was Scylla and Charybdis all over again. Only one thing shone out plainly—that Mr. Smith should not be informed that the secret had leaked out. Well, what of telling the truth—with modifications? A rattling good lie that would explain the eight pounds without compromising him? Say an advance from a deep-water ship? Or consular charity? Or saving a little boy—a sort of little Fauntleroy in a lace collar—from being run over? With subsequent gratitude and *largesse* on the part of parents? He had done such a thing once in San Francisco, and with this to give color and vivacity to his yarn might he not draw on his imagination for the rest? The real little boy had gasped and disappeared, leaving Kirk to fight a teamster. But it was worth thinking over as a possible expedient. He would think it over. It was a time to make resolutions, for assuredly he had sat on that camp stool long enough, and for good or evil must bring things to a head.

The next morning, fagged and dispirited, he returned to Rye Row. It was impossible to arrive at any resolution without first finding out whether Kittredge had returned. His plans for the day hinged on that. He knocked. The little housemaid shook her head. No Kittredge!

He was about to turn away when a hansom sprang round the corner, and there was the novelist himself!

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There was a hurried, friendly greeting on the curb. Kirk poured out his tale of woe. The little housemaid beamed from the doorway, all smiles. Kittredge showed a beautiful contrition. He insisted on taking the whole disaster on his own shoulders. What an ass he had been not to foresee it all. Good Heavens, yes, what an ass! He couldn't forgive himself, he said. Not that it was any use crying over spilled milk. The thing to do was to get that hundred-pound note in a jiffy. Oh, the banks weren't open yet? Gad, that was true, wasn't it? But there were clubs! That reminded him that he had been made a member of the Athenæum. At least he *thought* he'd been made a member of the Athenæum. He hadn't opened any of his letters for three weeks, and was consequently hazy. But he fancied he remembered one with the name of the Athenæum on it. It might have been to tell him that he was blackballed. But they'd risk it, anyhow. Yes, the Athenæum was a club. A sort of bishops' deadfall, you know, where they could take off their gaiters and play pinochle. Mostly bishops, with a few headliners from the arts. A sort of concession to a democratic age, old man.

Kirk jumped in. Kittredge grabbed a bunch of telegrams that the little housemaid handed up. Still brightly talking he ordered the cabman to drive to the Athenæum, opening the envelopes as he did so, and throwing them into the street. He remarked that it was a telegraphic age, and that the only use for letters nowadays was as a vehicle for checks. Oh, and love letters, of course! Love and money needed covers, but the rest of the world's correspondence was better done by wire. Kittredge was helping this modern tendency by ignoring letters altogether. It wouldn't be long before everybody would follow suit. Though he himself would probably fall a martyr to progress, the penalty of all

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reformers, anyhow. Hated in this century, and canonized in the next!

It was exhilarating to sit beside this wonderful man—the personification of success—and warm oneself in his kindness and geniality. Kirk's spirits rose. It was impossible to resist such charm and gayety. He even gave a humorous description of himself sitting on a camp stool and reading "Zanoni." In the retrospect it seemed extraordinarily laughable. Kittredge laughed over it, too, and said he would put it in a story. Two days in an area reading "Zanoni"! That was real life for you—the thing a fellow couldn't invent. A writer had to stick to life as a drowning man to an oar. Get away from life, and you are lost—you sink—leaving only bubbles to show where you had been. That was his, Kittredge's, present danger. Oh, yes, he knew it! Feared it! The tendency of success to surround itself with walls and keep life out—the real, palpitating life of the people. Put a butler between you and the world, and as a novelist you committed suicide. Take them all—good men butlered to death, everyone—atrophied into old leather, and repeating themselves like phonographs. Except the daring few, like Tolstoi for instance, or Hardy, or Loti, who had the manhood to resist the Capuas of fame.

All this while they were bowling briskly through the streets, with a rattle of glass and a jingle of harness that often interrupted the novelist's tirade. His exuberant humor was contagious, and Kirk seemed to rub off something of his companion's freedom and light-heartedness. The belated appointment, the precariousness of his position, all his recent misgivings and terrors, troubled him no longer. He was content to smile and blindly share the conviction of security and good fortune that animated the man beside him. All would come right—he knew not how or

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wherefore—but Kittredge had ordained it so, and that was enough.

They drew up before the haunt of bishops, and Kittredge went in, taking with him Kirk's hundred pounds. A few minutes later he reappeared, looking rather crestfallen. Kirk steeled himself against disappointment, and assuming that his friend had failed, proposed to drive on to one of the big hotels.

"Oh, that's all right," said Kittredge, handing over a note. He smiled ruefully. "I've paid blood for that," he went on. "The office didn't have such a thing as a hundred-pound note, and I was just about to leave when Sir Cornelius Blum turned up—the biggest bore in London, you know—famous heavyweight conversationalist—social steam-roller. Well, he had one—a hundred-pound note, I mean—and I couldn't get it away from him without promising to dine at his house and read one of my stories aloud! The old wretch knew that he had me on the hip, and wouldn't fork out till everything had been signed and sealed! Oh, Diamond, Diamond, you know not what you've done!"

Kirk expressed his regrets.

"Well, it can't be helped," exclaimed the novelist, and fell into a profound melancholy.

The cabman broke into it by inquiring where he was to drive next.

Kittredge woke up.

"I'll drop you at the end of your street," he said dismally to Kirk. "Whatdyecallum Street where you were to meet Mr. Thingabob."

"Tedworth Street," put in Kirk. "Number 82."

Off they clattered again, Kittredge somewhat silent, Kirk jubilant, and squeezing the note as though it were the hand of a long-lost sweetheart. He was still in the mood of

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exultation. The last of his cares had disappeared. After incalculable difficulties, and misfortune on top of misfortune, here he was at last driving blithely to success and glory.

The novelist, rankling with memories of Sir Cornelius Blum, and bitter with the thought of that impending dinner, could not resist the impulse to take him down a peg.

"You're three days late," he said. "They may have bounced you for all you know!"

But Kirk's soaring spirit refused to droop. He laughed away the suggestion. He emphatically pointed out that in an enterprise of such evident magnitude, three days were as nothing.

"I'm not afraid of that," he said.

"It would be a joke on you if they had kept the number of the note!" said Kittredge, with a twinkle of his specs. "It isn't very probable, but you'd better be prepared for it."

Kirk's consternation provoked an immense mirth in his companion. Kittredge laughed and laughed. Then, with a delightful cordiality, he patted Kirk on the knee and told him that he was only teasing.

"You're all right, old fellow," he said. "The sort of men they're getting aren't likely to have extra hundred-pound notes. It's the very fact that they haven't that makes the test a test. They knew you only had a few shillings in your pocket, and the idea was to put a big temptation in your way. I only said it because you looked so silly and satisfied—a sort of kitten-and-cream expression, you know."

But Humpty-Dumpty once fallen would not so easily be set up again. Kirk worried horribly, and insisted on seriously debating the possibilities of such an unforeseen disaster. The novelist had to work like a Trojan to undo the harm

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his chance remark had caused. They were still deep in the discussion when the cabman drew up in front of 82 Tedworth Street.

"Good luck, old fellow," cried Kittredge, warmly shaking Kirk by the hand. "I'll back you to win any day. Come around to-night or to-morrow and tell me all about it. Ta-ta, and may God love you, and not call for you too soon!"

He drove away, leaving Kirk standing on the pavement in a state of painful excitement. The house looked extraordinarily still and deserted. The drawn blinds, the all-pervading dust, the unlivid air—somehow daunted him, and disinclined him to hurry. Vague and fanciful terrors beset him. What if no one should answer his knock? What if, indeed, the three days' delay had been fatal? What if the whole mysterious enterprise had as mysteriously flown, leaving no trace but this desolate shell? Conquering his irresolution, he walked up the steps and knocked. He wondered if the dazzling housemaid would admit him. Hoped exceedingly that she would. Knocked again—louder, more peremptorily. How slow they were! It was cruel to keep him standing there. Bang, bang, bang! He listened vainly for the sound of footsteps within. Bang, bang, bang—with an increasing irritation, blended with fear. Bang, bang, bang, BANG! A passer-by stopped and stared at him curiously. Kirk assumed an easy attitude—pretended to himself that he was delivering a parcel, and tried to act the part. Whistled, gazed up and down the street, knocked some more. Waited, whistled again, yawned, till the passer-by wearied of watching him and continued on his way.

Kirk discovered a bell that could be rung. So he rang it—rang and knocked, alternatively. Still nothing happened. The heavy door refused to open. He tried its knob on the

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bare possibility of its being unlocked. But it wasn't unlocked. On the contrary, it seemed not only locked, but bolted. He shook it angrily, venting his ill humor on it. Added a kick. Rang, knocked, shook it again. Then, conscious that he was attracting too much attention, and not knowing what else to do, he descended the steps and walked away.

An idea came to him to attack the premises from the rear. He remembered the little alley out on which he had looked the day of his first appointment. He discovered it without difficulty. It was an empty little alley: brick walls on either side of him; no danger of detection save from the rear windows of the adjacent houses. He searched them for a possible spy, and then relieved, considered the wall. It wasn't much of a wall—eight feet high or so—and the contractor had stinted the glass that was supposed to defy the burglar. Kirk found a likely place to set his foot in, rose, and with a sailor's nimbleness climbed over and dropped inside. A door gave access to the kitchen. It was locked, of course. All the lower windows were barred with iron. But one on the floor above was unprotected, and Kirk saw he could easily reach it by getting on the roof of a lean-to shed that apparently had been used to keep bicycles in. Bicycles and flower pots, to judge from a very cursory inspection of its interior. A minute later he was standing on the roof examining the window. It presented no difficulties save the intangible ones of the British Constitution and outraged law. Visions of penal servitude caused Kirk to turn his head and carefully scan the neighboring houses. Reassured, he knocked out an upper pane, undid the catch, raised the sash, and slipped into the silent house.

It was dark and ghostly. The shrouded twilight was only just sufficient to permit him to advance without groping.

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The boards creaked under him, and the house became alive with disconcerting echoes. He could not resist a feeling of awe, of danger, of unwarranted intrusion that might at any moment be summarily avenged from some dim recess or black passageway. He walked warily, ready to spring back, ready to clench his fists and defend himself. It was hard to resist the impression that he was attacking, and others waiting to defend, the citadel of mystery in which he had so recklessly set his foot. Through the profound gloom eyes seemed to watch him, and shadowy figures rustled as they closed on the line of his retreat.

Swallowing his fears, he tiptoed forward. He opened a door and stepped out on the stairway. It was the stairway up which he had been led on the day he had been given the hundred-pound note. He resolved to find the very room that Mr. Smith had occupied—Mr. Smith and the little imperturbable doctor. Here was the likeliest place to find some clew to put him on their track—a card, an addressed envelope, or some fallen trifle that the detectives of fiction were wont to make such good use of. He was much less sure of his own ability in this direction. Indeed, his only hope was that Mr. Smith's flitting had been unexpected, that it had been a case of grab and run, that the table might still be piled with memoranda, notebooks, and what not, all precipitately abandoned for him to pounce on now.

He entered the room, and going to the window raised the blind an inch. The flooding light revealed it much as it had been before. There was the table, there the three cheap chairs, there the butts of Mr. Smith's cigars. The table was littered with papers. Ink, penholders, black blotters, and a calendar—all set out in the orderly confusion that attends the desk of a busy man. In fact, the position of

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Dr. Jones's chair suggested that he had pushed it back, and had risen in the midst of his work, little realizing the call that was to take him away forever. Kirk seated himself in the chair and began to examine the papers with avidity. The first was a notebook. He hurriedly turned over the pages. Blank, blank, blank, every one. Then he applied himself to an assortment of loose sheets. There was not a word on any of them. Not a single word—not even a blot. But there were more notebooks, more papers. These, too, revealed the same emptiness of white paper. All had been sifted over, and there was not one that bore so much as the scratch of a pen.

His perplexed eyes at length settled themselves on the grate. Here, indeed, was a partial solution of the puzzle. The grate was black with burned manuscript—the crisp, crinkled remainders of what once had been written sheets. On some the ink still shone, to tantalize him on closer inspection with whole sentences that at a distance seemed easily decipherable. He knelt down, only to discover that he could not make out a single word. The detective of fiction would have had a microscope, or some admirable self-invented means to aid him. But Kirk hadn't. He could only stare dismally, and poke a finger through the incinerated mass, which thereupon crumbled into dust. Like a pricked bubble it fell to nothing, and the elusive words vanished forever from his ken.

He got up and set himself to search the whole room minutely. He ripped up the chairs, and tapped the table legs on the approved principles of Gaboriau. But the approved principles didn't help him. The chairs, of a plain, British, kitchen variety, held no secrets in their rush bottoms. The table legs were solid and equally sincere. The blotters, being black, were likewise uncommunicative. The

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floor was a richer field of research. Here were cigar butts and match ends in profusion. Also a shoelace. Also a crumpled-up telegraph form—blank.

But there were other rooms. He would not despair yet. He would ransack the whole house from top to bottom. And this he did, beginning at the garret, and working down with feverish thoroughness. It was depressingly easy. They were all as bare as a bone. The tenants previous to Mr. Smith appeared to be of that self-respecting class who pride themselves on leaving a clean house behind them. There was no rubbish to paw over, no closets crammed with trash. Nothing but the inevitable dust that had filtered in, impalpable, resistless, unseen, to glaze the floors and settle thickly on mantelpieces and gas fixtures.

When at last the task was over, Kirk had to admit that he was defeated. The room upstairs—the room with the three chairs, the table, and the choked grate—seemed the only one that Smith & Co. had ever inhabited, if, indeed, the word inhabited could be applied to the use they had put it to. He decided to examine it again on the unlikely contingency that he had overlooked something. He couldn't remember that he had, but it would be a satisfaction to make certain. So he went up again, and allowing himself the privilege of a better light, began anew.

Suddenly, in the midst of his work, he was startled by a terrific rat-a-tat-tat at the front door. It resounded through the empty house like claps of thunder. He caught his breath. He had the sensation of being detected in some crime. Were the police breaking in? Was the door open before their axes? Ought he to fly to the garret, or make a break for it by the way he came?

But his moment of panic passed. He was in a tight place, and needed all his wits about him. Ten minutes later.

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he ran to the window, threw it wide open, and gazed down into the street.

What he saw was a postman descending the steps of No. 82, bearing a bulky packet of letters in his hand! An unmistakable British postman, ambling toward the next house on his round of deliveries!

CHAPTER VIII



IRK hastily closed the window and withdrew into the center of the room. He was ashamed to think how he had been fooled, how his imagination had exaggerated those innocent knocks into veritable thunders. Police—axes—good heavens, what tricks one's nerves could play! It was the gravelike stillness of the house that had preyed upon him—that and its mysteries, which he had set himself so unavailingly to solve. Then all at once it came over him that perhaps the postman had shot some letters through the slit of the door. This natural concomitant of his knock struck Kirk with the suddenness of a revelation. Of course that was why he had knocked—that was why any postman knocked—knocked—to deliver letters!

Kirk raced down the stairs three steps at a time. He reached the main floor at a jump, and flew to the little cage that hung suspended to the front door. Yes, within it was a letter, glimmering whitely through the bars! He had it out in a second, and carried it to the nearest window, where, intercepting a leak of light in the closely drawn blinds, he feverishly made out the address:

*J. H. Tregurtha, Esq.,
82 Tedworth St.,
W.*

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In the corner of the envelope, boldly printed in red ink was:

JAFFRAY & THATCHER,
House Agents,
807 Marylebone Road, W.

The detective of fiction would have made no bones of tearing it open with a yell of triumph. But Kirk, though he had wandered very far from the station in life in which he had been born and bred, had yet the repugnance of a gentleman to prying into other people's correspondence. Though he was on fire with curiosity, the promptings of honor withheld his itching fingers. He turned the letter over and over in his hand, as much teased as a famished setter with a duck. But the temptation was irresistible. It wasn't in human nature not to fall before it. Somehow the letter came open, he hardly knew how. Conscience protested, but the deed was done nevertheless.

It was a curt epistle, in a round, undistinguished clerk's hand.

Jaffray & Thatcher, House Agents,
807 Marylebone Road, W.

November 5th, 189—

J. H. TREGURTHA, Esq.,

DEAR SIR: The gas company informs us that there is a small charge against you of 3s. 10d. for gas consumed during your one month's occupancy of 82 Tedworth Street. Kindly remit the amount to this office at your early convenience, and believe us to be, dear sir,

Yours respectfully,

JAFFRAY & THATCHER,
Per N. T. R.

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Kirk hugged himself at his good fortune. Here again was a rift in the best-laid plans of mice and men. A trifling gas bill, incurred and forgotten, had stultified all those elaborate precautions that had thus far succeeded in keeping Kirk without a clew. Burned papers, aliases, mysterious rendezvous, had been all in vain. J. H. Tregurtha was of course Mr. Smith! Five minutes with the directory would discover his address. Kirk was now to windward of the whole affair, and the rest was but seamanship and clever handling.

He lost no time in getting out of the house, returning as he came by the roof of the shed. At a chemist's shop, for a charge of one penny, he was permitted to examine the directory, which was chained up like a dog, as though otherwise it might bolt out of the door and incontinently disappear. He ran his finger down the column of Tre-s with a trembling of eagerness. After all, it was only a presumption that the man he sought lived in London. Then the name swam before him in the small mean type of the densely printed page. The right name, the right initials, startling the eye as though written in fire!

"Tregurtha, J. H., Solicitor, 719 Chancery Lane, E. C."

Kirk took the first hansom, and giving this address to the cabman, was rapidly borne toward his destination. His brain was in a whirl. He hardly knew what he meant to say to Mr. Tregurtha. To find him was the great thing—to find and confront him! Chancery Lane was so narrow, and the houses on either hand so high and dark, that it was with the sensation of entering a cellar that Kirk turned into it out of Holborn, and shivered in a chilly gust that struck him to the marrow of his bones.

At last they drew up before a dingy doorway. Kirk paid the cabman and ran in, stopping to run his eyes over

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the series of brass plates that bore, in decaying letters from which the paint had long since fled, the names of the occupants of No. 719. On one of them was J. H. Tregurtha, Solicitor, second floor. Mounting the stairs, and directed thither by a passing messenger, he at length reached a glazed door on which there was a similar legend. He was about to knock when the door opened of itself, and he found himself face to face with Mr. Smith!

If Kirk were surprised, it would require a stronger term to do justice to Mr. Smith's expression. Discomposure, stupefaction even, was written on those rosy features. He started violently and fell back, still staring at Kirk as though he could not believe his eyes. Kirk took in the fact that he was handsomely dressed in conventional afternoon costume—frock coat, silk hat, immaculate white waistcoat, faultless trousers, and a rich dark tie held in place by a circlet of pearls—glossy, well groomed, almost bandboxy. A singular metamorphosis indeed, from the Mr. Smith of the threadbare tweeds and the dirty collar.

Kirk was about to speak when Mr. Smith stopped him with a warning gesture.

"Don't talk here," he said. "Come inside to my private office," and with that he led the way within.

Kirk found himself in a large apartment, furnished in a key of gloomy splendor. Thick carpets, heavy substantial mahogany furniture, framed steel engravings—all guarded from intrusion by a little fence that ran the length of the room, over which a kitten could have jumped without the slightest difficulty. Two clerks on stools were busy scribbling in a corner. Another was at work at a typewriter. Seated before an imposing desk, and deep in the perusal of some law books, was an elderly little man of the head-clerk variety, who rose deferentially as Mr. Smith appeared.

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"Please see that I'm not disturbed, Mr. Timms," said Mr. Smith, in a tone of unquestioned authority. "If anything should come up, let Mr. Standing attend to it."

He then beckoned to Kirk, and opening a door marked "private," gravely ushered him into a smaller office. Here, in a cosier atmosphere than the one he had left, Kirk was bidden to take an armchair, while Mr. Smith, after carefully locking the door, drew up another close beside him.

"Now, my dear man," he said, with some return to his ordinary breezy and good-natured manner, "you have managed to drive a four-in-hand through a secret we thought we had guarded very carefully. I will be quite frank with you, and will admit that I regret it exceedingly. Not that you can do us any harm, if such by any chance should be your intention. Yes, my true name is Tregurtha—well—and what of it?"

Kirk was embarrassed by this somewhat provocative address. The tone, though kind, bore an underlying threat. Mr. Smith—or rather Tregurtha—was plainly ill at ease, and appeared to be arming himself for a disagreeable interview.

"It's none of my business who you are," said Kirk with spirit. "I haven't the remotest intention of doing you any harm. My only desire is, as it always has been, to enroll myself in your undertaking, and explain why I failed to keep my appointment."

Thus speaking, he laid down the hundred-pound note.

Mr. Tregurtha showed no interest in it.

"My dear man," he said, "you're just three days too late!"

"Too late!" cried Kirk.

"Too late," repeated Mr. Tregurtha coolly.

"Then what am I to do?"

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Tregurtha shrugged his shoulders.

"You've made a hundred pounds," he observed. "Your time wasn't altogether wasted. I would suggest that you go away and spend it—and, if you'll do me a favor, keep the thing out of the newspapers. My principals would resent any publicity, and blame me for the leakage. Though, of course, if it should become common property, I would have no hesitation in giving you the lie, and denying it *in toto*."

"Oh, Mr. Tregurtha, you're mistaking the kind of man I am." Kirk's voice was full of pleading, and a convincing sincerity animated his handsome face. "I have set my heart on this thing. You've told me yourself that I'm the very kind you want. Don't throw me over without at least listening to my story—to my explanations. After all, though I do say it myself, I am too good to lose. I have grit and loyalty, and the fact that I have successfully tracked you down ought to be a proof, at any rate, of my intelligence."

Mr. Tregurtha smilingly conceded the point.

"That's the hardest part of it," he said at last. "You were preëminently the type of man we wanted—and wanted badly. I am not penalizing you for failing in your appointment. I wouldn't let a trifle like that stand in the road. You see——"

He stopped abruptly.

"Well?" inquired Kirk.

"Oh, you're too late, my dear man. The whole business has now passed out of my hands. I couldn't help you if I would!"

"Do you mean that you are not the leader? That honestly and truly your position was only that of a subordinate?"

"Precisely."

"And that now, having accomplished the duty you were

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entrusted with, others are carrying the enterprise to the next stage?"

"That is it exactly."

"And the present interview between us is simply to persuade me to hold my tongue, and not give away the little I already know?"

"You couldn't put it better."

"Of course, I wouldn't do that," continued Kirk. "You've treated me with a great deal of consideration. You've made me a present of a hundred pounds. I will only ask you to make some allowances for a deeply disappointed man. I don't want to flatter you, but you've made me feel that anything you are connected with is bound to be worth while. To lose my chance now is almost more than I can bear."

Mr. Tregurtha sighed. His face was all sympathy and kindness. His regret was unfeigned.

"Too bad—too bad," he murmured.

"Now, see here," went on Kirk with increasing confidence, "you must do me a good turn. You must move heaven and earth. You must pitchfork me in somehow. I have the will; you must find the way!"

"The steamer left two days ago!"

No sooner had he said this than he looked as though he would have gladly recalled it. His mouth tightened, the kindness died out of his eyes. He had plainly made a slip, and was pulling himself together to undo his blunder.

He waited keenly, defensively, for Kirk to take advantage of his remark.

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Tregurtha," said Kirk. "If it's to be a duel between us, I know well enough that I will lose. I won't ask any questions about that steamer, or try to crowbar my way into your secret. I'd do that fast enough

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if I thought I could succeed. But I know I can't. My only hope is to throw myself on your generosity. To beg—not extort.”

Tregurtha did not change a muscle of his face. Then he rose, still silent, and walked about the room in the shambling, aimless fashion that helps some men to think. He returned and sat down again, crossing his fat legs.

“Will you take a gamble?” he inquired.

“A gamble?”

“I can offer you a bare possibility. It involves a long journey, very likely for nothing—a journey in the dark. You will arrive at a certain place, a town, and there you will wait for at least ten days. Perhaps instructions may reach you—perhaps they may not. If my principals want you they will certainly find you. Do not fear about that part of it—they will find you, wherever you are. But if they don't want you, you will hear nothing from them. At the expiration of ten days you may consider yourself free of the whole affair. You will understand that your services have not been required. This is all the assurance I can give you. It is what sportsmen would call a long shot—a ten to one. No, a hundred to one! A chance so slight that were I in your place I would absolutely not consider it. But it is a chance—and will you take it?”

“I'll take anything,” said Kirk comprehensively.

“And you will not consider yourself tricked—got rid of—sent on a fool's errand—if no call is made on you, and you find yourself in a distant country, as ignored, as apparently forgotten, as though you were the victim of some deliberate deception?”

The two men's eyes met. Was Tregurtha sincere, or was his proposal a masterpiece of duplicity? A scheme designed to get rid of him finally, completely, and forever?

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Kirk was at a loss to decide. His whole instinct was to believe; yet years of contact with the seamy side of life counseled caution.

"That's all I can do," added Tregurtha. "Take it, or leave it."

"Mr. Tregurtha," said Kirk, "have I that on your sacred word of honor?"

The solicitor solemnly raised his hand.

"Indeed you have," he remarked. "I pledge you my honor. And I will only repeat that you must not misjudge me if you fail."

"That's understood," said Kirk. "Only I wish you could see your way—without violating the confidence of your principals—to enlighten me as to the general nature of the enterprise. I mean," he continued quickly, as a shadow passed over Tregurtha's face, "I mean, is it to be on land or sea? Does it involve a question of weeks or months? Am I to equip myself for any special kind of service? I am an old campaigner, Mr. Tregurtha, and the merest inkling of the work expected of me would be priceless—for, as you know, one's comfort, even one's safety, so frequently turns on trifles. And the more dangerous the undertaking, the more important it becomes to guard one's health and strength. I don't want to go out there and fail for lack of a rubber blanket to lie on at night, or omit breeches and boots if the expedition is to be mounted? I trust you will not think this request unreasonable, or suspect me of trying to take any advantage of you!"

Mr. Tregurtha, with a nod of his head, admitted the entire reasonableness of the demand. Only, as he went on to say, it was quite unnecessary to satisfy it.

"Everything has been arranged for," he said. "There are others to attend to all that. Nothing has been over-

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looked, I can assure you. This is a question of picked men, performing an arduous and dangerous task, and, considering that the cost of recruiting them has reached nearly four hundred pounds each, you can understand that we will take the most excellent care of them."

This closed Kirk's mouth. It was impossible to press Mr. Tregurtha any further without appearing both rude and inquisitive.

Tregurtha rose.

"I'm afraid you will have to excuse me," he remarked. "You might be good enough to wait in the outer office until I can send some one for your ticket! I hope you will not mind its being second class," he added. "I am spending other people's money, you know, and even as it is—in your matter, I mean—I am already unduly stretching my authority."

Kirk expressed his satisfaction with any kind of a ticket. What did he care which class it was! Give him a bunk and a blanket, and enough to eat, and he could make himself comfortable on anything afloat. Thus protesting his willingness, he followed Mr. Tregurtha into the outer office. Here a whispered consultation took place between the solicitor and Mr. Timms, in the course of which the latter's face often turned significantly in Kirk's direction.

"Now, my dear man," said Tregurtha, holding out his hand to Kirk, "I will wish you good-bye and good luck. Mr. Timms has taken charge of your affair, and you will simply wait till it is settled. As for myself, important business calls me elsewhere. I cannot tell you how much I respect your determination to take all chances and conquer all obstacles. You will probably fail, for I've already told you of the odds against you. But, by Jove, I admire your spirit. From the bottom of my heart I wish you success.

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Who knows but what in a few months you will be back here with a hundred thousand pounds to invest! Ha-ha, who knows! Yes, it's a gamble—but sometimes gamblers break the bank! Good-bye again—take care of yourself—lucky chap you are to get away from all this fog and cold. Wish I was!"

The big man bustled cheerfully away, and his steps were heard descending the stairs. Mr. Timms made a civil remark about the weather, invited Kirk to sit down, and giving one of the clerks a letter to take to the steamship office, informed Kirk that he would not long be kept waiting. This done, Mr. Timms buried his nose in his books again, feeling that he had satisfied all the demands of courtesy. The typewriter clacked, the street outside rumbled with traffic, the remaining clerk twisted on his high stool and yawned audibly. Kirk, essentially a man of the out-of-doors, pitied these unfortunate slaves of routine and drudgery. His own life had been a hard one, but he had managed to keep the yoke off his neck. Even the sight of it on others depressed him. He gazed at Mr. Timms as he might at some wretched outcast, saying to himself in the words of the missionary bishop: "But for the grace of God, that might be I!"

But these momentary reflections vanished in favor of others more personal and more thrilling. There was the recent interview to speculate upon. The ticket. Tregurtha's good faith or the reverse. The location of that distant country to which he had been assigned. North, south, east, or west, where was that steamer to bear him? He would dearly have liked to inquire of Mr. Timms, but somehow he could not bring himself to do so. He was shy of Mr. Timms. He was afraid that Mr. Timms would stare, would look surprised at a man who did not know where he was

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going. The typist would look surprised, too. Also the pert young man on the stool. Even as it was, he could not turn in his chair without their all stealthily regarding him. The typist and the clerk, at least. Mr. Timms, with his thin shoulders bowed over the desk, was too intent on his researches to be thus disturbed. Occasionally he would raise his eyes to the ceiling, like a chicken drinking, and then take another long sip of the law. A dreary chicken, drearily occupied, whom it had taken long years to train and bring up to his present perfection. A chicken who had to drink ink and digest law books for the privilege of being permitted to live. So at least it seemed to Kirk, to whom the contrast of his own wild fortunes, with unknown possibilities of great stakes to be won or lost, made him feel a prince in comparison.

At last the other clerk arrived. Kirk could hardly tolerate his delay in taking off his overcoat and muffler, and the leisurely manner in which he dawdled about before handing Mr. Timms the ticket. Mr. Timms was equally unconcerned, and calmly laid it by on his desk untouched until he had finished the page he was reading. The ticket meant nothing to those people. Nor Kirk's impatience. Nor his eager and flushing face. It was but another break in the monotony of their jog trot round. And not much of a break at that.

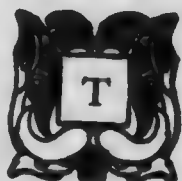
Mr. Timms examined the ticket, which was of a greenish complexion, and thickly printed on the back with the things shipping companies do for you in the event of this, that, or the other—from losing your baggage to unsuccessfully encountering pirates. Then he made an entry in a daybook. Then, with the same air of supreme indifference, he turned to Kirk, and with the benignity of a person dropping a penny into a blind man's cup, said, "Here you are!"

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Kirk snatched it from him. The intensity of his curiosity was agonizing. His eyes leaped to the type, and to the filled-in blanks, with their stubby writing.

His destination was Port of Spain, Trinidad, West Indies. His ship was the *Medway*, of the Royal Mail S. S. Co., scheduled to sail from Southampton on November 21st.

CHAPTER IX



HE succeeding twelve days were too uneventful to be described in detail. Kirk broke his hundred pounds, installed himself in cheap but comfortable lodgings, and bought a modest wardrobe at the Army and Navy Stores. They were peaceful, placid days—these of his waiting—pleasant at the time, and pleasanter still to look back upon. It was a period of reaction, much of it spent before the fire in slippers and dressing gown, with books and papers to while away the hours between those ample meals that alone seemed to mark the progress of time. Brain, body, and nerves—all were weary, all were glad to rest. Trinidad seemed immeasurably distant. The desperate enterprise itself became a dream, separated from reality by oceans and continents. The thought of failure had no power to disturb him. The whole thing was so remote, so hazy, so inconceivable. The mind refused to worry about it, or see beyond Southampton. Life was now bounded by Southampton. It was impossible to project himself beyond Southampton.

Of course he went and saw Kittredge. Kittredge was tremendously excited. Kittredge had a thousand ideas on the subject—revolutions, dictators, a Venezuelan empire—Heaven knows what! Kirk smoked his pipe and listened imperturbably to the novelist. He loved the companionship, the privilege of lying back in a chair with his feet on a table, the perennial satisfaction of having gained such a friend. But he said little; he smoked and smoked; while

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Kittredge reared fairy castles and carved out kingdoms. The novelist was humorously indignant at Kirk's apathy.

"You're a chump," he vociferated. "You haven't a soul above a milk wagon. Here I am wading through seas of blood, pouring out treasures of imagination worth at least a shilling a word, without counting the American rights, while you look on like a stuck pig."

Kirk lazily blew away the smoke.

"I can't make head or tail of it," he said. "I've racked my head long enough. I've determined to take things as they come."

"It's men like you who peel potatoes while others are covering themselves with everlasting glory."

"Can't help it. It's a stone wall, and you can't see through it any better than I can. They've kept their secret mighty well, Kittredge, and we aren't likely to stumble on it by accident. I'm as willing as anybody to make a dinosaur out of a thigh bone—but where's your thigh bone?"

"It's infernally puzzling," granted the novelist.

"It's worse," said Kirk. "Because we aren't even sure of their good faith. Perhaps they are just side-tracking me to Trinidad to get me out of London. I can't forget how disgusted Tregurtha looked when I plumped in on him. By the way, did you manage to find out anything about him?"

"Not very much."

"What exactly?"

"Only that he is a solicitor of the confidential, man-of-business kind. Acts in this capacity for a small *clientèle* of very rich people. A man of undoubted standing. The sort that everybody speaks well of, and nobody knows! One of those obscure pillars of the universe who attract no attention unless they tumble. Negatively important, you know.

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Get a leaded paragraph if he died or levanted, but otherwise ignored. Controls unlimited money, yet with the reputation of investing only in ground rents, and gilt-edged mortgages. Not at all one's idea of a pirate leader."

"No, he certainly isn't," said Kirk.

"In fact, he's about the biggest mystery in the whole mysterious business," went on Kittredge. "It's midsummer madness for a man like that to lend himself to underhand and desperate schemes. He ought to have looked perturbed when you met him, for if the truth got out he would cut a weird figure. What gets me is that he should be fool enough to risk it!"

"It gets me, too," said Kirk, with an increasing perplexity. "Kittredge, it's—it's staggering!"

At last the great day came. Waterloo station. Special train. Mountains of baggage. Weeping friends. Golf sticks. "Take your seats! Take your seats!" Smoky, grimy old London left behind. A desolate winter landscape of luminous grays. Rain beating against the windows. Stations rattling past without a stop. A smell of sea and tar. Smokestacks, yards, rigging, men in jerseys. Prolonged backing, tooting, and the sensation of being shunted on a rougher track. "All tickets ready! All tickets ready!" Another stop. Effusion of green tickets. On again, very slowly, till abreast of a towering liner with rakish smokestacks. Porters, pandemonium, "second-class passengers this way," surging gangways, crush, jostle, slippery slats underfoot, umbrella handle in your back, frantic officers in blue and gold—and aboard!

The trip was monotonous. Kirk kept to himself, and mixed little with his fellow-passengers. Not that he was an unsocial man, but it seemed wiser not to make any friends,

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and risk no confidences. He had a secret to keep, and his rôle was to be inconspicuous and attract no attention. He earned the reputation of being a pleasant, silent man, inseparable from his pipe and his book. Those that tried to penetrate his reserve called him morose. The pumping fraternity, male and female, got nothing out of him. To point-blank questions he would protect himself by asking what time it was, and if this did not suffice he would offer conjectures on the next day's run. His final resort was to continue his reading with an air of artless preoccupation. Altogether, he was a very unsatisfactory second-class passenger, and was popularly nicknamed "the oyster."

There were the usual dances, the usual concerts, the usual quarrels and flirtations. Fiercely whiskered, South American gentlemen had to be restrained from pulling the noses of other fiercely whiskered, South American gentlemen. Dark-eyed ladies of Castile looted the fruit dishes at the beginning of dinner, and calmly appropriated the best orange or the only grapes. Obstreperous children made everybody miserable and played screaming games. Colored citizens of Haiti, in frock coats and carpet slippers, jabbered endlessly about "President Sam"—whoever he was—and the necessity of something being done at once, with interminable, "*Entendez-vous, je vous prrrrie,*" and "*Tenez, mon ami, tenez!—Garçon, du vin wouge, s'il vous plait!*" The English, largely predominant, busied themselves in the manufacture of a social system, and soon evolved an upper circle, a next-to-the-upper circle, and an ostracized list of those that must be kept down and resolutely cold-shouldered.

And so the days passed in agreeable tedium, the little world of the second class sorting itself out, and everyone save Kirk finding his or her level. Leaders emerged—bores—reciters. Toadies and mischief-makers. Bold young men

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pursued maidens. Wily maidens pursued bashful young men. And over all was the dome of tropic sky, and around them the unbroken blue horizon, with the *Medway* as the center of the universe.

In thirteen days they reached Barbadoes, where Kirk changed to the *Solent*, one of the three smaller vessels awaiting the mail. The *Medway* herself went on to Colon. Three days later Kirk arrived at Port of Spain, Trinidad.

There was the usual bustle attending an incoming steamer. Friends greeting one another, touts forcing hotel cards into unwilling hands and fighting for hand baggage. Officials, peddlers, boatmen, naked boys diving for pennies, insinuating darkies, with confidential grins and winks, pressing some very dubious wares on your attention. A terrible loneliness came over Kirk as he stood there, bag in hand, waiting he did not know for what. The folly of his journey now began to strike him for the first time. How was anyone to find him in this city? How could any message possibly reach him? He had been fooled. He had been got out of the way. But even as he said these things to himself he kept gazing about anxiously, prepared to be greeted, prepared to have a letter slipped into his hand. He answered every glance in his direction, drawing himself up, and with the words, "Yes, I am Lewis Kirkpatrick," ready on his lips. But no one asked him who he was. No one accosted him, save touts and boatmen. How he had been tricked! How childishly he had been tricked!

In London it had seemed simple enough. "Go to Port of Spain, and await instructions." He had had no idea it would turn out to be an imposing city, with wharves and warehouses and innumerable hotels and wide, spacious streets. He, the needle in a haystack of colossal proportions! No address had been given him, no rendezvous. He

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had a sickening sense that to abandon the steamer would be to abandon everything. Here, at least, he could be found—if anybody wanted to find him. But once ashore, and lost among twenty thousand people! How precipitate he had been, how foolish and unheeding! Hadn't even put it squarely to Tregurtha, who had treacherously slipped away, with the very idea, perhaps, of eluding such questions.

He waited miserably, while the commotion lessened and the decks thinned. Passenger after passenger was rowed ashore. The ship regained something of her ordinary quiet. People eyed him curiously and wondered at his indecision. His bag bore a large label with "Port of Spain" on it. Did he not know, then, that this was Port of Spain? Alas, he did. Hated the sight of it, too. Wished a thousand times that he had never quitted London!

He stopped one of the officers and begged for the address of the best hotel. He would be less a needle in the best hotel. It seemed that it was called the Ice House. It was an extravagance to put up at the best hotel, but was it not the right policy? There could be no doubt about that. Unless he were to give up all hope, at once and forever, the Ice House was imperative. Here he was findable at any rate. Here he could rest with some confidence (the words stuck in his throat) that these vague "instructions" would not miscarry if he were lucky enough still to be wanted. He went ashore in a very gloomy frame of mind, and offered a nigger boy sixpence to guide him to the hotel. He engaged a room, and still hoping against hope, asked if there was a letter for Lewis Kirkpatrick. But there was no letter. He turned away, not disappointed—it was worse than disappointment—but crushed, heartsick, and realizing all over again the futility of his voyage.

The hotel, like most hotels in the tropics, was comfort-

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less and draughty, with long, uncarpeted corridors, and big, bare public rooms. For some reason or other there were very few guests, and in comparison with the crowded and noisy steamer the place seemed altogether lifeless, and given over to flies and slumbering waiters. Kirk was restless and unhappy. He was afraid to go out and look at the town lest the message might come in his absence. Resigned as he was to failure, convinced that Tregurtha had betrayed him, he yet could not bring himself to actually accept defeat. In his thoughts, however black, there was always a "perhaps." He would stick tight to the Ice House and wait. Wait, most probably, for nothing; but wait, anyhow. Keep himself in evidence. Hang about the verandas, pester the office, smoke and read and loaf, yet always with a weather eye lifted.

At dinner—an uncommonly good one, by the way—he was put at a table not far from a party of three. They were all men, and their good spirits and hilarity only served in contrast to make his own lot appear more bitter. He listened moodily to the popping of their champagne corks, their outbursts of laughter, their boisterous raillery of one another, in which there were references to unintelligible mishaps in the past that often convulsed the table.

The word *Medway* made Kirk prick up his ears. It seemed that they had been fellow-passengers, and had come out in the same steamer. In the saloon, of course. In that other world, enviously seen from across a barrier, where people dressed for dinner, lolled aristocratically in deck chairs, and walked in spacious freedom. They were sportsmen—big-game men—on a rousing holiday that was to take them up the Orinoco after tapirs and tigers. There was no concealment of these plans. Kirk was no eavesdropper. It was for all to hear, and they talked and acted like boys out

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of school. Nice boys, though. They were gentlemen indubitably, but exuberant and jolly—old and tried companions who had been in Africa together, India, everywhere.

The more serious member of the party was referred to as "the bart." He was about forty-five, with crisp, iron-gray hair and a close-cut beard. A fine-looking man, with a loud voice, full of friendly authority. A pair of eyeglasses dangled from his neck, which he put on only when he wanted to speak to a waiter. He couldn't even ask for bread without first setting them on the end of his nose, holding his head at an angle lest they should fall off. They were always dropping into his plate or getting tangled on his buttons, and as he seemed to see perfectly well without them—everything but waiters, that is—Kirk wondered why he should expose himself to so much annoyance for nothing.

Of the two other members of the trio, one was a very stout, fair, apoplectic man of about the same age as the bart., with a blurring way of speaking, and a large flipper of a hand with which he would attack the person he wished to address. His manner of getting into the conversation was to hit out with his flipper like a walrus, and land the back of his hand on the other fellow's waistcoat. He would keep this up till he had captured attention, slamming the speaker of the moment into submission. He never had anything particular to say, but slam, slam, it had to be said. He was named Mins—Sydney Mins.

The third was younger—not over thirty. He answered to either Freddy or "the captain." He was dark and handsome, with a waxed mustache and the stiffish carriage of a soldier. His black eyes sparkled with fire and mockery. He bubbled over with talk, repartee, and whimsicality. He could make the most ordinary transaction appear absurd by the humorous twist he gave everything. He would flip

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a waiter and imitate Mins's plethoric tone. He would drop imaginary eyeglasses into his fricasseed chicken, and fish them out on the end of his fork. He would purposely misunderstand a question and make it preposterous. A charming fellow, sprightly and gay, whose incessant chaff never concealed a sting. Able to see a joke on himself, too, and laugh heartily when the tables were turned. Full of boyishness and fun, and with all the winning manners of a well-bred Englishman. His name, as Kirk learned from the waiter, was Treadwell—Captain Frederick Treadwell, D.S.O., of the British Army. The man with the stiff gray hair was Sir Adrian Stiles, Baronet. The walrus was Mr. Mins, of Opp, Pryor & Mins, the great brewers. "Mints of money," said the waiter with negro unctuousness. "Could buy out this hotel and never wiggle an eyelash. Fif' thousand a year, sah. The tiger as gets him will do a million pounds worth of damage!"

Kirk, from his solitary table, watched the merry party with a certain wistfulness. What jolly men they were, how happy and care free—these glorified beings from another world, with nothing to do but drink champagne and shoot tigers! It was a privilege to sit near them, to pick up the crumbs of their racy talk, to smile into his plate at some lively sally of the captain's. Yet his pleasure was not unalloyed. The contrast was too painful. It intensified his own loneliness, and weighed down his already heavy heart. He felt like a beggar gazing through the plate-glass windows of some magnificent shop—gazing at the unattainable, so near, and yet so immeasurably far. His eyes smarted with a sort of pity for himself. He wondered if in the whole town there was anyone so sad as he—so miserable and despairing.

The next morning there was still no letter. He break-

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fasted, and wandered out on one of the verandas to smoke. Sat on a very hard green chair, and filled his pipe. He had hardly taken more than a whiff or two when Mr. Mins appeared. Mr. Mins took the adjoining, hard, green chair, and elaborately lighted a cigar. The man of millions breathed hard, fidgeted, and executed some grunts that seemed the preliminaries of conversation. Then he threw out his flipper and landed a blow in the region of Kirk's stomach. The attack, though expected, was startling in its severity. It jarred Kirk's breakfast and made him gasp.

"Live here?" inquired Mins, flipping him again. "Live here?"

"No," replied Kirk, "I am a stranger."

Mr. Mins relapsed into silence, blew out smoke, and regarded some buzzards engaged in scavenging the gutter.

Then he hit out again.

"Yankee?" he asked.

"Yes," said Kirk. "I'm an American."

Mr. Mins digested this long and earnestly.

Finally he remarked dreamily that he had won sixpence.

Letting this sink in, he turned, and catching Kirk off his guard, flipped him good and hard.

"Had a bet with Stiles," he said. "Saw you in the bar last night. Saw your foot reaching for a step. Sure sign. American. Stiles wouldn't believe it. Bet him sixpence. Won sixpence. Joke on Stiles. Have a drink?"

Kirk didn't want to drink, but as an overture of friendship he did not care to refuse it. Drinks were brought. He tried to keep the ball of conversation rolling. But it would not roll. The weather, buzzards, tigers—but all to no effect. Mr. Mins subsided into smoke, and an occasional "ugh, ugh." The flipper hung by his side, out of action. He

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yawned, crossed his fat legs, and remained ponderously inert.

Here, after a while, they were both discovered by the captain and Stiles. The newcomers had been riding. They entered boisterously, clanking spurs, shaking the floor with their heavy boots, and greeting Mins as though they had been separated for a week. They drew up chairs, looking at Kirk a little askance.

"American," said Mins, giving Kirk another in the solar plexus by way of introduction. "Ha-ha! Knew I was right. Won sixpence!"

Kirk smiled. The captain and Stiles nodded to him good-naturedly. The sixpence was paid. The American need of resting the foot on something came in for attention. The subject was rapidly exhausted. Then Mins, with an air of immense import, announced that he had some news to tell. He tantalized his companions by making them offer guesses. No, it wasn't this, it wasn't that. Try again, old fellow! At length they gave it up.

"His girl," said Mins, indicating the captain jovially. "The stunner on the *Medway*—the one that wouldn't look at him—always crying under a tartan rug—maid on guard to keep off the cavalry— Miss Mystery Westbrook—ha-ha—what do you think? Upstairs on the front veranda, nibbling buttered toast! Been here all the while, and we never knew it! Freddy fooled—bart. off the scent like a silly ass—poor little me the fellow to run her down. 'Pon my soul and honor—yes, right above us—in a lovely pink arrangement with satin bows! Ha-ha—peace has its victories as well as war! Stumbled right on her, and got one of those knock-down looks from her gray eyes. Took me for the captain, and up goes her pretty nose!"

This half-intelligible monologue caused the liveliest sen-

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sation. The captain jumped up excitedly. Stiles was for a time eagerly incredulous. Kirk pieced together the odds and ends of their random sentences and exclamations. This Miss Westbrook—Vera Westbrook—had occupied one of the best cabins of the ship. She was exceedingly pretty and exceedingly sad. The captain, very much smitten, had tried every artifice to break down the reserve with which she surrounded herself. Had tried without the least success, greatly to the amazement of his two companions, who had made her a target of their curiosity. And here she was in the Ice House, discovered by chance—Miss Mystery Westbrook, as they called her, demurely eating buttered toast on a veranda where all might walk!

The captain hurried off to verify the discovery. Stiles amplified the tale of the young lady's extraordinary beauty and extraordinary reserve. Mins flipped Stiles and Kirk indiscriminately in order to coerce their attention and prevent himself from being left out.

"Here was I (flip)—a pretty warm man, as they use^d to say (flip). One of the leading commoners of England, by Jove—snubbed, would you believe it! (Flip, flip, flip.) And Stiles, old county family (flip)—name in Doomsday Book—(flip, flip)—snubbed, too (flip, flip, flip)! And Fred Treadwell—dashing—Horse Artillery—D. S. O.—(flip)—Chitral campaign (flip)—Bhil war (flip)—South African record—(flip) young, fascinating, magnificent future (flip)—snubbed, too, by George!" (Flip, flip, flip, flip!)

The captain returned, smiling ruefully.

"Just my luck," he said. "Saw her disappearing through a doorway in a pink blaze of attractiveness. Hope she didn't—didn't—think——"

"You're a silly ass," said Mins.

"Felt more like an awful bounder," continued the cap-

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tain dismally. "I thought I'd just walk in, and—er—make sure Mins wasn't spoofing us—and appear surprised—and—bow, don't you know—and perhaps find an opening to say good morning, you know!"

"It's those boots," said Stiles. "Til-lillup, Til-lillup—probably took for you an earthquake or a mule battery going into action. If you'd only left it to me——"

"Leave it to you!" roared the captain scornfully. "You're at the root of all our trouble. You caught her the first day out, when she was too seasick to escape, and bored her to the screaming point with your infernal family. When I'm interested in a girl I'll thank you to keep your paws off. Yes, and Mins, too. He only hit her once, but it prejudiced her against all of us."

"Never hit her," growled Mins. "Don't know what you're talking about. Offered her my binoculars, that's all!"

"With one of your bear pats," added Treadwell.

"Wish you fellows would shut up," exclaimed Stiles. "You make such a row I can't think. The hotel people must know something about her."

"No, they don't," said Treadwell. "I went and asked them."

"There's some mystery about her," continued Stiles. "I would give my first chance at a tiger to know what it is. Oh, you can chaff all you like, but you'd give your ears to know—both of you!"

"Little Mystery Westbrook, I wonder who you are," hummed the captain. "With your eyes sae sweet, and your feet sae neat, and——"

A gawky negro servant checked this musical outburst.

"Mr. Lewis Kirkpatrick?" he asked, impersonally rolling his eyes over the whole party. "Mr. Lewis Kirkpatrick?"

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"Here!" shouted Kirk, jumping up.

"Letter for you in the office, sah."

Kirk hastily excused himself, and flew into the house.

The clerk handed him the letter, explaining that as it was said to contain money he had hesitated to trust it to any of the servants to deliver.

"Just as well to be on the safe side," he added, smiling.

Kirk tore it open. Snuggled within ten five-dollar notes he found two separate sheets. On one was written: "*You will proceed to Ciudad Bolivar on the 'El Capitan,' leaving here on Sunday. Remain on the steamer till you are called for by one of our agents.*" On the other was: "*Pass Lewis Kirkpatrick up the river.*" There was no signature to either, but Kirk remarked that the paper was of a peculiar quality, very thick, glossy, and mottled, and to judge from the watermark, German in origin. It had been probably chosen to identify the bearer with the mysterious enterprise, and yet give him no clew in the way of names or initials.

"Who brought this?" asked Kirk.

"A boy."

"What kind of boy?"

"Just an ordinary, common or garden boy," said the clerk humorously.

"Ever see him before?"

The clerk was about to answer "No," when a rustle of skirts caused him to turn. He assumed a most deferential expression, and leaned over the counter, beaming from ear to ear. Kirk turned, too, and looked into the eyes of the dazzling housemaid who had admitted him to 82 Tedworth Street!

There was an instant of mute recognition.

Kirk, as in a dream, lifted his hat, and withdrew a step backward. Still in a dream he heard the clerk saying: "Yes,

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Miss Westbrook. Make it up to Sunday, certainly Miss Westbrook. Oh, the steamer is most comfortable, Miss Westbrook. All our guests have spoken highly of the *El Capitan*, Miss Westbrook. Making any stay at Bolivar? Interesting place, but poor accommodation—very poor. Nothing but cots, and a snake in each room—fact, positively—take the place of cats, you know. Better stay on the boat, and come back with her. No snakes on the boat, Miss Westbrook!"

She turned away, and with an unshrinking look at Kirk, as though to recall the momentary recognition she had been betrayed into, passed him without a sign, and glided gracefully toward the stair.

CHAPTER X



CENE, four days later, the upper deck of the *El Capitan*, a large, sidewheel, river steamer of American design, beating her way up the muddy waters of the Orinoco. On either hand, diminished by distance to drab insignificance, was a low line that the glass showed to be forest, with the roots of the trees sunk in ooze. A sullen landscape, in spite of the bright sky overhead, forbidding in its suggestion of flood, savagery, and tracklessness. A frightful region, in which man, naked and bestial, contests his dominion with snakes and jaguars, and perches himself on crazy platforms in the tops of trees—a human monkey, envious of his half-brother's tail, gibbering at passing steamers and propitiating them with charms.

The passengers, some thirty-five or forty in number, were gathered on the forward deck. An idiot with a gun was taking snapshots at some white birds that hovered about the steamer, and lazily kept pace with her. Kirk, leaning against the rail, was resentfully regarding Sydney Mins, who was hanging over Miss Westbrook, and attempting to make himself agreeable. She lay in a deck chair, still and beautiful, with her clustering chestnut hair somewhat loosened and her pretty hands folded in her lap. She was very fair, her face oval, and features were of a singular purity. A vivid face that it was not easy to take one's eyes from, adorable when it smiled, and tender and enigmatic in repose. Kirk thought he had never seen a more exquisite human being.

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From her little bronze boots to the top of her curly head she seemed to him the embodiment of perfect womanhood. Her grace and delicacy, her high-bred air, something girlishly appealing under the infliction of Mins—all moved Kirk with a fine exasperation.

It seemed a brutal world into which such flowers were flung to be trampled on. It made Kirk quite hot to think of it. Angels, to be devoured by wolves. That tall, captain fellow, cigar in mouth, and talking tiger to the sweet-faced baronet, would probably think he was conferring a great favor in marrying such a paragon. If not he, indeed, some similar swaggering, top-lofty creature, to whom giving up bears for matrimony would probably appear in the light of a condescension. And the paragon would probably think so, too, and contentedly yield the treasure of herself to a man who had not sense enough to value it. Kirk felt very bitter. And unwarrantable jealousy made him sick at heart. What business had this insufferable brewer to force himself on the girl and coerce her by sheer noise and bulk? Pioneering the way for the two others, who were covertly looking on, ready to advance when the stout skirmisher had effected his work. Anybody could see that he was an infliction to her. Kirk ached to take him by the collar and throw him overboard. That was what it was to be a gentleman—to be hampered by a finer instinct. A gentleman kept aloof, a trifle jaundiced perhaps, while bounders butted in. Such at least was how Kirk put it to himself. The truth was he would have given worlds to be in Mins's shoes. But he was a shy man—shy, and innately chivalrous—and would have deemed it a great liberty to accost this young lady—even to ask if she were comfortable, or propose to move the chair into a shadier place. It took a coarser type to do that—a Mins! And he hated and envied him, both at once.

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He moved nearer, teased and tempted. He vented his ill humor on the idiot with the gun. Ordered the idiot to stop. Said he ought to be ashamed of himself. Stood there ready to twist it out of his hands if the fellow didn't acquiesce. The fellow blustered and then subsided, cowed by Kirk's determined look—disappeared with his gun, to be seen or heard no more. Kirk leaned against a stanchion, not a dozen feet from Mins, and moodily filled another pipe. He felt very stiff, self-conscious, and angry. He almost regretted the attention his action had excited. People edged away from him, as though they, too, might be called to account. They hardly dared to look at the white birds, lest they might get into trouble with this belligerent stranger. Kirk kept his flushed face rigorously away from Miss Westbrook. He felt humiliated, lonely—almost an outcast—for no conceivable reason. He wondered how he was to endure another day of this kind of thing.

But he could not keep his face away forever. He turned—and as he turned their eyes met. Then, to his utter astonishment, she called out, "Mr. Kirkpatrick!"

Kirk could not have been more stupefied if the deck had opened and swallowed him up. He gazed at her, unable to believe his ears.

"Here—you—" exclaimed Mins roughly. "Don't stand there like that—lady wants you!"

Kirk hastened to her side. His face was burning. The sound of his own name, coming from those lips, had fairly unmanned him.

"May I have a turn with you about the decks?" Miss Westbrook asked sweetly, as though it were a most natural request. "No, keep your pipe—I don't mind it!"

"Well, I like that," blurted out Mins in a scolding voice. "As if I hadn't spent an hour trying to——"

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"You don't mind, do you?" Miss Westbrook asked, resting her lustrous eyes on Kirk's face, and disregarding Mins's protest.

"Indeed, I'd be only too delighted," said Kirk, recovering himself, and respectfully offering his hand to assist her.

She rose and took his arm, while Mins, rejoining his astonished companions, gazed after the pair—too hurt and too surprised even to flip.

Kirk was very much embarrassed. He was at a loss for anything to say. His divinity was embarrassed also, and a delicate pink tinged her face.

"You must help me," she murmured. "You will think it very strange—very forward perhaps, but—but—I hardly know how to ask such a favor, but those men are so curious about me—not rude—heaven knows, they are not actually rude—it would be easier if they were—but they persecute me with little attentions—with questions that are looked even if they are not asked. It makes me very uncomfortable. You could help me a great deal if you wanted to."

Kirk warmly proffered his services.

"I knew you would say that," she returned. "Yet it took a lot of courage to speak to you like that. But I was driven to it—I had to—that man had planted himself there for the day."

"But what is it you wish me to do?" asked Kirk.

"Oh, just to stand between me and the world," she said, looking up with a troubled smile. "Is it too much to ask? Talk to me, sit next to me at table—monopolize me."

Kirk smiled, too. He was radiant with satisfaction. A favor indeed! Why, the doors of paradise were opening before him!

"There's nothing that would please me better," he exclaimed.

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"You must have found it hard, too," she said significantly.

"You mean——?"

"Yes——"

"Oh, I lied," returned Kirk. "It's none of their business who we are. A man has to protect himself!"

Their eyes met understandingly. It was a tacit acknowledgment of their common secret. Kirk was tempted to put his thoughts into words. The effect of them on his companion was disconcerting. She withdrew her arm, and impetuously silenced him.

"Don't make me regret my decision," she cried. "We know what we know—but it isn't to be spoken of. If you will not consent to that—if you will not put it out of your mind absolutely—I—I——"

"Oh, forgive me," pleaded Kirk. "I shall never refer to it again. Please forgive me!"

She relented, and took his arm again. They walked aft and leaned over the taffrail, watching the white birds.

"I wonder where we are going to," she said at last in almost a whisper. "I wonder where we are going to!" Then she broke off suddenly with a frightened laugh. "Oh, dear, I'm as bad as you are—I must keep off the grass myself. But we shall be good friends, shan't we? You are going to live up to my good opinion of you? I want so much of you—so much! Is it a bargain? Men are so— But you are different—I can see you are different! You'll be good to me, won't you? I shall be so helpless, so lost—if you fail me. Do you know, you have suddenly become the most important person in my life!"

"I hardly see how," said Kirk. "But you can be assured of one thing—I will serve you with all the devotion in me, and count it a very high privilege."

Their hands met in a clasp of gratification.

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"Thank you," she said simply. "You've lifted a load off my heart."

This was the beginning of an intimacy that to spectators appeared closer than it really was. It was more the friendship of a brother and sister, long separated, almost strangers, reunited after many years. The pair were always together. Their chairs were always side by side, either at table or on deck. They walked together, read together, played unending games of cards together. It was a confederacy that kept busybodies at a distance. So loverlike to all appearance that the hardest interloper was daunted. Madame Jeanne Beliot, Miss Westbrook's maid, was greatly scandalized. She was a thin, middle-aged woman with a mouth like a wolf, and something of a wolf's disposition—jealous and cowardly, with a rasping temper. Her lack of English saved Kirk many passages at arms, but her mistress, in the seclusion of their little cabin, fared less well at the grim lady's hands.

Miss Westbrook confided to Kirk that she was an intolerable annoyance.

"I'm going to send her back from Bolivar," she said. "I can't stand her any more. She is wearing me out. Every day she gets worse and more religious. Not that I would mind her being religious if she would keep it to herself—but she gets messages from God, and all sorts of things—messages to me, you know, transmitted through her like a telephone central. It may sound absurd, but it has become absolutely unbearable. The higher powers object to you. They object excessively to the Orinoco River. They order me to go home under the penalty of all sorts of dreadful things. You see, she isn't an ordinary maid. She's been with us so long that she has gradually got to own the family. Papa——"

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She stopped, and turned away her eyes brimming with tears. The mention of her father had evidently evoked a painful emotion. It was some time before she recovered herself, but even then her smile was a little tremulous, and her voice still poignant with thoughts that Kirk was not allowed to share.

"I wouldn't do that," he said, referring to Madame Beliot's dismissal. "This is a wild country, and you had better put up with her. You must put up with her! It would be perfect madness to—to——"

"I have you," she returned, half pettishly, half in fun. "You won't let the tigers eat me, will you?"

"Well, I'm hardly—the equivalent of a—" The wide-open, innocent gray eyes abashed him. The business of explaining propriety to a lovely, young creature was embarrassing. But Kirk floundered through it, genuinely aghast. "Besides," he added, treading delicately on the tabooed subject, "our roads may separate at Bolivar."

Her only reply was a look, brilliant and enigmatic in its denial, that seemed to premise a greater knowledge of his own future than he himself possessed. It made him feel that her liking for him was not a caprice, but rather the result of a fellowship that she recognized and accepted while yet keeping him in the dark. In some strange manner, for a while at least, their fates were joined. Her dependence on him was not a favor, but a right. She expected him to serve her, not because she was a very pretty woman, but by reason of some invisible authority that was invested in her—an authority that he dimly felt and readily acquiesced in. It was a singular relation, and to Kirk a very precious one. He was not a vain man—he did not think to presume upon it. He was grateful, very grateful. He was her dog, to watch over and protect her, and he asked no more than a

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dog's reward—toleration and a friendly pat on the head. It was the humbleness of a great love—a love that asked for nothing and gave all—rare, beautiful, and ennobling.

As they drew nearer their destination she seemed to lose courage and cling to him the more. She had long, sad spells of silence which he forbore to break in on, some instinct withholding him. He suited himself to her moods, smoking his pipe, saying nothing. She often told him that he was a great comfort to her—a great consolation. "So much company and so little bother," she said naively. "So big and dependable and quiet. I have a lot to thank you for, Mr. Kirkpatrick!"

All this while our three tiger hunters were in a pother of unsatisfied and burning curiosity. They watched Kirk's elevation with resentful surprise. To be cut out by this chap who had crossed second class in the same steamer with them was intolerable, insulting. The captain, though inwardly boiling, pretended to care the least, and was too well bred a man to pry and speculate. Stiles was frankly a gossip, and gave up his whole mind to the solution of the mystery. Mins, of a coarser fiber than either, energetically waylaid Kirk, and tried to flip him into communicativeness. It wasn't altogether to the credit of the baronet that he was so willing to profit by Mins's inquisitiveness, and even to egg him on. But shipboard life is demoralizing, and human nature, confronted by a mystery, is sadly apt to lose its head. There are many things we do that, when set in type, appear blacker than they are. Yet it must be confessed that our tiger hunters were consumed by an insatiable curiosity, and hardly had any other topic of conversation. Morning, noon, and night they kept Kirk and Miss Westbrook under an unceasing surveillance, and teased one another with unanswerable questions.

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It was late in the afternoon when Bolivar came in sight. A low, straggling town on the left bank, with red-tiled roofs, and a few squalid streets losing themselves in jungle. The falls that barred this reach of the Orinoco were not particularly impressive, and suggested more an artificial dam, nine or ten feet high, than one of the rocky obstructions of nature. Above the falls was a small, rusty, stern-wheel steamer, together with three singular sailing craft of the kind that penetrate the upper waters of the Orinoco. The river sailor has to seek his wind above the treetops of the forest, and for this purpose has to rear a mast astonishingly disproportionate in height to the length of his vessel. This towering stick, as lofty as a ship's mainmast, and similarly rattled, bears in the dizzy sky two little gimcrack yards on which are set two little pocket-handkerchief sails. The effect is so grotesque that the eye has difficulty in accustoming itself to the sight. It is perpetually startled, and cannot see a man going aloft without apprehension. It would seem as though his weight would topple over the whole crazy structure, and lay the tiny vessel on her beam ends.

The *El Capitan* moored off the town, and was at once boarded by the port authorities. There was the inevitable animation of an arriving steamer—noisy boatmen, frantic passengers, stacks of baggage, gesticulating functionaries. Jabber, jabber, jabber! Exhibition of passports. Assiduous stewards waiting to be tipped. Winches roaring. Great wooden lighters hovering vulturelike, trying to fasten themselves on the corpse. Nigger boys diving for small silver. Hubbub, fuss, orders, threats, and the sharp hiss of escaping steam.

Kirk and Miss Westbrook had drawn aside. Behind them, on a camp stool, was Madame Belliot, dejectedly eating oranges, and resigning herself with what grace she

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could to being deserted. Miss Westbrook was pale and frightened. She was holding to Kirk's hand like a child, and shrank close to him as people passed and jostled her. Kirk, too, was uneasy, and his eyes searched the unfamiliar faces for some gleam of recognition. It was hard to resist the conviction that something had gone amiss—that he was not to be met and taken charge of, after all. The destiny of his companion fretted him even more. She also was waiting. She, also, was searching the faces with timid persistence. Were they to be separated? Was he to stand there and do nothing while she was led away by some of those swarthy cutthroats. Why had she not trusted him entirely? Why should she persist in screening herself in mystery? By so doing she had put it out of his power to help her—to advise and protect her. He was not even allowed to speak to her. Ah, it was intolerable—cruel. He had earned her confidence. He had earned the right to it. Yet he was as ignorant as Mins over there—Mins, who was slyly watching them while pretending to busy himself with gun cases and packages.

Kirk noticed a halfbreed Indian, barefooted, bareheaded, in red-striped pyjamas, impassively smoking a cigarette beside him. He was short and thickset, with high cheek bones and beady eyes. From time to time he spat on the deck and rubbed the place with his naked foot. Kirk disliked his proximity and edged away. But the halfbreed stuck by him. His persistency annoyed Kirk, who was about to shove him away when something in the fellow's manner arrested him. The beady eyes had a curious seeking look. The impassive face was ambiguously uplifted to his.

Kirk chanced it.

"Looking for anybody, señor?"

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The half-breed drew out a dirty scrap of paper, on which Kirk was dumfounded to read, "*Lewis Kirkpatrick.*"

There was a moment of bewilderment, of stupelaction.

The half-breed stolidly continued to puff at his cigarette.

Kirk produced his pass. The man gazed at it indifferently. Then laying his hand on Kirk's sleeve he made a pantomime of leading him to the gangway.

But Miss Westbrook interfered. Before Kirk could realize what she was doing, she had drawn the Indian out of earshot, and was speaking to him in a low and agitated voice. He submitted woodenly, cigarette in mouth. The girl pleaded. She held to his arm. Her face was paler than ever, and almost desperate. But the creature she addressed made no sign. His beady eyes settled themselves on a little diamond heart at her neck. She unsnapped it and offered it to him, but he pushed it away. She turned to a passing Venezuelan officer, who stared at her in insolent admiration, and twirled his mustache. There ensued a colloquy of three. The Venezuelan officer deftly accepted a bank note. Something was laboriously explained to him, and by him to the Indian. The latter's masklike face relaxed. It grew dimly comprehensive. He put out his hand and patted her on the shoulder—respectfully, reassuringly, stroking her like a dog. It was all right. He understood. This way, please!

Kirk and Miss Westbrook resigned themselves to him. Peons seized the young lady's trunks—three in number—together with her dressing case and Kirk's bag. The half-breed came behind, urging them toward the gangway as though they were sheep. The whole party descended into a boat and shoved off. It is strange how naturally one accepts a leader and follows him. Kirk made no demur. The girl was as submissive as himself. They smiled at each other

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and acquiesced, not knowing where they were going. The situation was even piquant. Kirk said it reminded him of the Babes in the Wood. High above them Madame Belliot alternately waved her handkerchief and cried into it. She seemed the emblem of a disappearing civilization—the last outpost, so to speak, of a world they were leaving behind.

They brought up at a wharf, landing at some green, slimy steps. Here were customhouse officers, of a sullen and slovenly aspect, who had things their own way for twenty minutes. But the little men were very polite and made the ordeal an easy one. The trunks were carried into the boat again, and the passengers retook their seats, and a course set across the river to the opposite bank. The half-breed, by way of conversation, occasionally stroked his charges on the back—an ingenious performance of the good-dog-good-dog order. Kirk stroked him, and everybody was pleased.

Grounding on the shingle the crew leaped out and dragged the boat high and dry. The trunks were raised on brawny shoulders, and with the half-breed leading the whole party struck inland. The track was rough; the trees met overhead; an agreeable twilight relieved the eye after the glare of sun and water; the falls boomed dully in the distance. It was all a singular spectacle—the trunks pasted over with European labels, the shuffling peons, the leader in his red-striped pyjamas, Kirk and Miss Westbrook delightedly watching the parrots overhead as though they had no other concern in life. The spirit of adventure was in them both. An exhilarating comradeship animated them. It was all so mad, so laughable! What were they doing in this extraordinary zoo! Where was Coffeecake taking them? They had caught the name from the peons. It was very close to Coffeecake, anyhow. Coffeecake! How they laughed! What fun it all was! Only why weren't there

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any monkeys? It only needed monkeys to complete the tropic picture!

The road turned, paralleling the river. They were mounting the left bank, making a detour that would bring them out, apparently, above the falls. The trees thinned. The rusty white steamer loomed ahead, coupled to the shore by a plank. Coffeecake's steamer? It would almost seem so. What was the name, in faded gilt, on the front of the pilot house? Bis—yes—Bismarck! The *S. S. Bismarck*, Captain Coffeecake! Such a disreputable old *Bismarck*, with the paint peeling off his plates and several floats of his stern wheel missing! A three-veranda vessel, so to speak, with an aged engine on the ground floor. Dirty, dilapidated, down at the heel—given over to squalor and Coffeecake.

They passed up the plank. The deck was piled high with firewood, roughly stacked, with little lanes running in and out. Coffeecake led the way up the ladder to deck number two. More firewood. More little lanes. A shabby saloon amidships, with four cabins off it, two on either side. Over the door of one was a brass plate marked "CAPTAIN." Coffeecake indicated that this was for Miss Westbrook, and threw it open. A peon within was busily engaged in filling two gunny sacks with the belongings of its late occupant. Razors, pyjamas, shoes, underclothes—all going in pellmell.

"Where was the captain?"

"*Muerto, señor.*"

"Dead!"

Gibberish to the effect that the cabin would soon be in good shape. Well-aired bed, fresh sheets, everything to the young lady's satisfaction!

Across the way, under a plate marked "CHIEF ENGINEER," was the door of Kirk's cabin. It was in somewhat better condition than the other, and the packing process, as

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evidenced by a stout gunny sack, had been already completed.

"Where was the chief engineer, then?"

"*Muerto, señor!*"

They reached the top deck in a less cheerful frame of mind. "*Muerto, señor,*" was disturbing. How *muerto*? Whether knife or fever, it seemed equally depressing. The holiday flavor had somehow evaporated. It was rather a grim little steamboat after all. Yes, a very grim little steamboat, with dead men's beds to sleep in. Ugh! Well, he had his pistol, and Miss Westbrook had a two-ounce bottle of quinine. But it was all a trifle creepy-crawly just the same. There were several empty grass hammocks swinging between the stanchions. Coffeecake curled up in one and went to sleep. Kirk and Miss Westbrook settled themselves respectively in two others, and wondered what was going to happen next. The drowsy afternoon was sinking into sunset, and there was no particular indication that the *Bismarck* would ever move. The pair talked together in low tones. Miss Westbrook was confident it was fever that had carried off the captain and the chief engineer. It was a frightful country—the white man's grave. They must boil every drop of water and keep out of the sun. No gunny sack wind-up for them.

They were still deep in these reflections when there arose a shout from the bank. Coffeecake roused himself and went forward, followed by his two passengers. They beheld a peon bearing a large mail bag. He hurried up the gangplank, and even as he did so the sleepy *Bismarck* awoke. There was a rumbling of steam, the reverberation of engines, the sound of guttural orders. Coffeecake ran up into the pilot house and took the wheel. Bells jingled; ropes were cast off; the plank was drawn in; and before Kirk could fully

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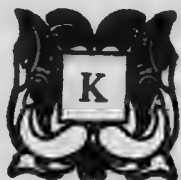
realize what was taking place, the steamer was under steerage-way and swinging out into the stream.

He dashed below to examine the bag, which was lying on the forward deck where the peon had thrown it.

On it he read:

DR. VON ZEDTWITZ,
ORINOCO IMPROVEMENT COMPANY, BOLIVAR.

CHAPTER XI



KIRK had seen many strange places in the course of his life, and had found himself in some queer situations—but in all his adventurous past there had been nothing to compare with the *Bismarck*, or to those days that now unrolled themselves before him. The unending river, the vast and impenetrable forests on either hand, the mysterious destination to which he was being borne—all stirred him with a feeling of romance that he had not known since boyhood. The glamour of exotic scenes was heightened by a companionship that made every moment precious. There were but two people in the world—Vera Westbrook and himself—and what lover could but envy him?

Kirk arranged a little paradise on the upper deck. Here were their hammocks, a table, books, binoculars, chairs, and a canvas screen that could be shifted to protect them from the dazzling glare. This camp was on the forward part of the vessel, so that they had but to raise their eyes to watch the unfolding panorama before them. They read aloud to each other, taking up the book in turn. They talked, discussing the imaginary characters, Vera speaking for the women, Kirk for the men. They watched monkeys in the treetops—parrots—alligators on sandy banks. And above everything they laughed, with an unflinching entertainment in the trifles that made up their day. The laughter of happy comradeship, the gayest laughter of all, springing from that delicious contentment which has its source in love.

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Kirk knew she liked him. But beyond that he was baffled, not knowing what to think. She was so frank, so confiding, so trustful, that the actual freedom of their intercourse disquieted him. It seemed to imply on her part a regard in which the heart had no concern. Kirk dimly felt that her very friendship precluded a more tender sentiment. There was nothing of the pursuer and the pursued in their relation. If Kirk, with the ardor of a man deeply in love, ventured at times to press his suit, she at once froze, and made him understand with a sweet imperiousness that he was presuming on forbidden ground. He became instantly conscious that here he had to deal with another woman, and his surprise, almost humiliation, was most painful. A woman separated from him by a thousand barriers of caste and position, whose condescension he had been fool enough to misunderstand. It made him realize that it was her superiority which permitted the singular friendship to exist between them. The great are always most gracious in their treatment of those beneath them. The true aristocrat is a much better hand at unbending than the grocer.

Kirk never felt so sure of being in her good graces as when he could make her smile. He was all right so long as he treated her as a charming boy whom chance had thrown in his path. But let him grow serious, and she shrank into her girlish armor—with a vexation, a resentment, that was not to be easily appeased. Love, or the pretense of love, was utterly out of the question. It affronted her, and Kirk soon learned to submit himself to her will. This renunciation cost him some bitter moments. It was the price he had to pay for her toleration of him—for her kindness and *camaraderie*. At times he grudged the price, and was moody and heart-sick. He was given so much and so little.

She had no compunction in drawing him out about him-

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self. Her rule of reticence was extraordinarily one-sided. He had to tell everything, and lay his whole life bare, while she remained, as she had begun—a mystery. He was at a loss even to guess her nationality. She was not English, and yet she seemed not to be American. She appeared to him a stepchild of both, a delightful cosmopolitan, with a dash of French thrown in. She was familiar with all these countries, and apparently much at home in each. At any rate, London, Washington, and Paris were constantly on her lips. She passed indifferently from the one to the other, somehow conveying in her manner that she had a place in all three. Kirk learned only one definite thing about her, which was that her mother had died when she was yet a child, leaving her, as she expressed it, "with a father to take care of." The mention of her father, as always, plunged her into a reverie. She would hastily change the subject, though her face would remain overcast for an hour afterwards, and her gayety become forced and unnatural. There was little doubt that her journey had some connection with her father. It almost seemed, indeed, that she was going to him. Though the why and wherefore of it racked Kirk's head with unanswerable conjectures.

The third person in their strange life was Coffeecake. This astounding mariner was everything on that ship, from captain to cabin boy. Kirk and Miss Westbrook saw nothing of the crew, who pigged together on the engine deck, and never trespassed above, save at times to relieve Coffeecake in the pilot house. Coffeecake housemaided their cabins. Coffeecake brought them their unassuming meals. Coffeecake smoothed them down, literally, with a large, brown hand whenever they seemed to him out of spirits or in need of sympathy or affection. It was Coffeecake who, when doubtful of his course, or perhaps to ascertain his position—the

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question was never actually determined—tasted the water in which they floated, and with connoisseurlike sips out of a tin can solved wonderful problems of river navigation. He was capable of tucking them in at night or hearing them say their prayers. The will, at any rate, was never wanting, and there was a kind-uncle quality in his attentions that was most endearing.

The meals he served were as queer as anything else connected with the *Bismarck*. A can of some kind of meat, presumably chosen at random, together with a can of vegetables, similarly picked out. Add ship's biscuits *ad lib* and a steaming pot of chocolate flavored with cinnamon—and there was lunch or breakfast or dinner, as the case might be. He seemed to be guided by the pictures on the can. A bullock stood for beef, a sheep for mutton, and so on. Once he was in the act of opening a can on which was the effigy of a red devil (it was deviled tongue) when the label caught his eye, and he suddenly stopped transfixed. He pointed at the red apparition with his finger, and with a nauseated expression ran to the rail and threw it overboard.

Coffeecake drew the line at canned devil!

This rough and ready housekeeping was answerable for some unheard-of combination of meat and vegetable, lobster and green peas, sardines and sauerkraut, sausages and asparagus. Once they sat down to plum pudding and string beans. But the chocolate was excellent in spite of its peculiar flavoring, and though the diet could not be called luxurious, they made out well enough, and enjoyed these artless meals with the relish that comes from long days passed in the open air.

At sundown the *Bismarck* tied up beside the bank, and the toils and perils of the day were over. Coffeecake usually chose a sandy beach to moor by, explaining that tigers and

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snakes dreaded these open places and were careful to avoid them. Whether this was true or not they certainly saw no sign of either, although on one occasion they heard a curious, sobbing sound, like that of a peevish child, which Coffeecake declared to come from a jaguar. The half-breed would not allow his charges to land, dissuading them by a pantomime of the awful things that might happen if they did so. It was noticeable that the crew, who were withheld by no such prohibition, kept fairly close together, and when ashore never separated by more than a few yards. Man, in this region, held nature in a very uncertain bondage, and single-handed was no match for his myriad enemies.

These silent nights followed as an exquisite relief to the sultriness and glare of the daytime. A full moon lit the sky, the air was cool and hushed, the dark and broken forest gave back no sound, and the ear was untroubled save by the ripple of water along the keel. To survey it all from the height of the upper deck was a joy not easy to put into words. It was a beauty that hurt, a beauty that stirred the heart with a peculiar poignance; one was humbled without knowing why, distressed and moved by a profound and tender melancholy.

Side by side Kirk and Vera Westbrook would look down, often not exchanging a word, but more drawn together, more subtly in accord than they ever were at any other time in the day. The spell of that untrodden wilderness was upon them, the spell of the moon, of the tropic night, of strange and exotic scenes. Their crazy steamer seemed a sort of citadel, from which, secure and guarded, they gazed at the savage landscape as though from some magic carpet borne by genii. They had no map; they knew nothing of the windings of that mighty river on which day by day they steamed into the heart of the continent; they knew only that civilization

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was receding, and that before them was the still and shining Orinoco with its secrets yet untold.

A week went by and brought with it no interruption of their voyage. They passed a few villages desolately set on the edge of the forest, with boats drawn up on the river beach, much like rows of alligators. Lifeless little hamlets, consisting of a dozen tumble-down sheds, roofed with thatch. The glass showed some recumbent figures in hammocks, naked children, and pigs. Coffeecake did not care to stop at any of them. He made unintelligible gestures of disapprobation. No villages for Coffeecake. He preferred the primeval forest and the sand bank.

Eight days, nine days, ten days—they had almost lost count. A drowsy routine had settled on them, a drowsy contentment and *laissez-faire*. Kirk would willingly have gone on forever to the end of his allotted span. But this, of course, was not to be. There is a conclusion to everything. The *Bismarck*, one torrid noon, slowed down beside a ramshackle wharf, from which a path led up to a couple of large wooden sheds. A few Indians were there to meet them with a bullock wagon. It was an ungainly, prairie-schooner affair, with a tentlike top of canvas, and was drawn by three yoke of oxen. Into it were put Miss Westbrook's trunks, Kirk's belongings, and the mail bag, together with some hammocks, canned stuff, and camp kettles. The day was suffocatingly hot. The very air shivered with heat. The Babes in the Wood sat on an empty gin case and watched the proceedings with immense depression. They were too dizzy and blinded to have any curiosity left. Even the news that Coffeecake was to accompany them did little to raise their spirits. They felt like Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, and could do nothing but mop their faces and gasp. But the indefatigable Coffeecake

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took command, bustled about, and gradually got things into shape.

The Babes in the Woods were invited to get in, which they did, although with no particular enthusiasm. The *Bismarck* looked cool and inviting compared to this stifling cart, innocent of springs and grilling in the sun. Coffeecake gave the word to move. The oxen were goaded forward with hoarse cries and the thrusts of long and sharp-pointed sticks. The ponderous wagon started, jolting and creaking like a field piece on the march. The expedition was off, laboriously doing three miles an hour, Coffeecake leading with his pyjama jacket negligently carried over one arm, and his bare brown back glistening with sweat.

The road, though narrow, was surprisingly good. There were culverts to prevent it from bogging in the rain, and rough, substantial bridges over the streams. It followed the river, rising gradually as the banks grew steeper and more precipitous, and occasionally made a detour inland to avoid some jutting promontory or impassable cliff. It was a clever piece of engineering, and Kirk, who himself had had some acquaintance with roadmaking, eyed it with approval. Blasting had not been shirked, and the gradients were consistently gentle. The man who had laid it out had been an expert, and his skill and foresight were evident on every hand. No Venezuelan assuredly, but some long-headed foreigner with Molesworth at his fingers' ends.

A few miles brought them high above the Orinoco, overlooking some rapids. Here was the explanation of the deserted *Bismarck*. She could go no farther. From the falls of Bolivar to this second barrier was the limit of her activity. The view grew more bold and picturesque as they toiled along the cliffs. The river whitened below them, a wild

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and flashing torrent, toiling furiously between narrowing walls of rock.

The grandeur of the scene was intensified by its utter loneliness. Forest, sky, and roaring river, but of man no sign. Forest, forest, forest, as far as the eye could reach. A savage wilderness, somber and frowning, as unconquered to-day as it was a thousand years ago. Human presumption faltered before the untamed majesty of nature. It was some little time before Kirk could assert himself, and guess at the horse power that was going to waste. It was not easy to resist the awe that the sight inspired, but once he had said "horse power" he felt better, and shook off his momentary humility. A tiger becomes less a tiger when you have ventured to forecast the value of its skin. It brings you back to good dry land. A man can then hold up his head again, and unflinchingly take his place in the scheme of things. Ignoble if you like, but such is the lord of creation, and the underlying instincts that have raised him to kingship. A practical beggar, eager always to get something for nothing.

It took Kirk and Vera a long time to learn that they did not have to remain in the wagon. At last they revolted, got out and walked, and joined Coffeecake at the head of the procession. The girl raised a pink silk parasol, and Kirk stuffed leaves in the crown of his sombrero, and thus protected from the sun they exchanged the wagon for a much easier mode of progression. Indeed, their principal trouble was to relax their gait so as not to outstrip the oxen altogether. It was a most loitering and snaillike business, with long rests beside the road, and fatiguingly tedious. The wagon moved just fast enough to constantly interrupt them in some cosy little talk, and just slow enough to make steady walking impossible. Of course, they might have gone on in advance and dropped the main body behind them, but this

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was where Coffeecake came in with a stern prohibition. He indicated that he was accountable for their safety, and that anything in the nature of a jaguar incident was likely to cost him dear. They were both a little incredulous by now of this jagaur that had been so consistently foisted upon them ever since leaving Bolivar. But it was not easy to argue with Coffeecake, especially as it involved one in a sort of personal encounter in which he yowled, bit your shoulder, and went through with a blood-curdling pantomime of scratching the skin off your face. In anything like a disagreement Coffeecake always came out on top.

At sundown, after having accomplished about fifteen miles, they arrived at a large bamboo shed, roofed with galvanized iron. The wagon was driven into it, and the oxen unyoked, while Coffeecake started a camp fire and busied himself in preparing supper. It was a wild and lonely spot in a little clearing overlooking the river far below. The disregarded jaguar, who in the sunlight had been scorned and derided, became much more real as the shades of night began to fall. Not that he betrayed himself in any tangible form, but the glancing firelight showed what seemed to be his eyes staring at them out of the gloom, and every rustle was ascribed to his stealthy approach as he crouched down before his spring. Coffeecake, like some good, old, darkey mammy with a bugaboo up the chimney, made a wonderful and capricious use of his ally. He invented or pooh-poohed jaguars as best suited his own purposes. Without this phantom his authority would have been shorn of half its strength. Propose something he did not like, and there was a fancy picture of a jaguar meowing for blood. Express a fear of jaguars on some other occasion, and he would smile pityingly at your needless alarm, and dismiss the subject with a few reassuring pats.

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Vera's hammock was slung inside the wagon, a poncho was draped over the front, and in this compact little bower she was left for the night. The rest of the party slept on the ground round the fire, Kirk with his Mauser pistol under the rough pillow he had made of grass. It had never occurred to him to be afraid of anything on the *Bismarck*; but here, in this outlandish outpost of the woods, he felt the need of being armed and ready for any emergency that might arise. He slept badly. He was restless and apprehensive. His head was racked by conjectures and forebodings. The mystery in which he had so long moved suddenly became intolerable. Where was he being taken? What was the meaning of it all? Who were these unseen people who were using him as a pawn in their extraordinary enterprise? And strangest of all, what could Vera Westbrook have to do with it? What inducement, or compulsion, could be sufficient to force her to face such perils? It was impossible to conceive anything more reckless or desperate. He trembled to think of the risks she had run—of the chances she had taken so unconcernedly. No, not unconcernedly—there had been times when she was frightened—when he had seen her quail and lose heart—when (in spirit at least) she had clung to him, her courage gone, her vivid face stained with tears.

Kirk awoke greatly refreshed. He put by these disturbing questions that had harassed him over night. A delicious morning brought with it acquiescence and philosophy. Secrets? Mysteries? Oh, he would unravel them fast enough. Possibly even too soon. There was at least another day that he could share with Vera, and ramble and talk and laugh without a thought of the future or of separation. The most delightful of all intimacies, and none the less precious that it might at any moment be snatched from him. They had

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an exhilarating breakfast together on the floor, while the oxen were being yoked again under the directions of Coffee-cake. This paternal and shiny-skinned individual had greatly endeared himself to the Babes in the Wood. They sang his praises over their cinnamon chocolate, and unanimously voted him six suits of new striped pyjamas. The worthy fellow had earned them twenty times over. The only trouble was that the will had to be taken for the deed. It was one of those fairy tale rewards, obtainable at the end of the rainbow, or some other similar and unlikely emporium. Under these circumstances Kirk thought they might generously raise the number to a dozen. Why not be prodigal when they were about it? Yes, a dozen—and silk at that!

The day was a repetition of the one before. They had almost to walk backwards to keep up with the oxen. Crawl, crawl, crawl, with stops under shady trees and long confidential talks. A picnic sort of day, passed amid noble and striking scenes, with random strolls off the road to look down at the river beneath. By two o'clock it grew so unsupportably hot that they took shelter in the wagon, and played games of cards on the jolting floor, peeping out at times to keep tab on the Orinoco. Kirk said he had grown so attached to the old river that he did not wish to lose it; to which Vera replied, with sparkling ambiguity, that he need not be afraid "as there was a good deal of it left!" Kirk asked her what she meant, but she evaded the question by trumping his king, and turning him off with a smile that might have meant much or nothing.

Night was falling as they entered a little village beside the river. It was a place with twenty or thirty houses, and the whole population came out to greet them. A hundred people at least, chattering like so many monkeys, and mobbing the wagon as though a circus had come to town. They

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were all Indians, of varying shades of swarthinness and dirt; a squalid, noisy crowd, with inquisitive hands and jeering, guttural voices. They accompanied the wagon to the water's edge, where, moored to the bank, was a small stern-wheel steamer, hardly bigger than a fair-sized launch. This vessel was the only civilized looking object in San Fernando de Atabapo. She was a smart little craft, with an upper deck, awninged over fore and aft, giving her a top-heavy look, as though the merest puff might send her over. A lantern glimmered on her main deck, illuminating the figure of a solitary white man. He was of middle age, stout, big, and fair, with untrimmed beard and hair that gave him the appearance of a blonde gorilla. Kirk found himself shaking a large and friendly hand and listening to a large and friendly voice. All belonged to Captain de Ruyter, late of the Dutch Navy, who introduced himself in accents that suggested he held a golf ball in his mouth.

"How many?" he asked.

"Two," said Kirk. "Myself, and—this young lady!"

"Leddy!" exclaimed Captain de Ruyter. "*Gott im Himmel*, what is dass you say?"

"I am Mr. Westbrook's daughter," said Vera, stepping forward and laying her hand on his sleeve.

The ex-naval officer straightened himself and saluted. He became instantly deferential, clicking his heels, and standing to attention.

"Captain de Ruyter, madam! At your service, madam!" he said.

"May I have a few words with you alone, captain?" she asked.

The blonde gorilla respectfully led her aft, guiding her past the obstructions of the deck with deep-voiced warnings and apologies. Kirk was at a loss to know what to do with

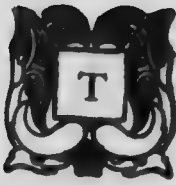
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himself, and after lingering a couple of minutes in indecision, he finally mounted to the deck above and seated himself on a bench. It was a clear and tranquil night. The stars were reflected in the water, shimmering like little streaks of fire. Coffeecake's voice was heard above the uproar of the crowd, fiercely jabbering in mingled entreaty, expostulation, and command. A flaming torch silhouetted the nearer houses, enhancing their strange and foreign aspect. In all his wanderings Kirk had never experienced such a sense of wildness, remoteness, and savagery. Never had he felt so immeasurably far from the world of civilization. Even in Arorai he had had the fellowship of the sea, that illimitable highway which bound him to Sydney, San Francisco, and all those haunts of men. No ocean could seem as impenetrable as those forests that now hemmed him in—those wastes of jungle, swamp, and unmappe^d mountains. He was in the very heart of South America, and as he gazed across the Orinoco he realized that he was in a country less known than Africa—untrodden and unexplored—save on the fringes of those giant rivers that alone had been penetrated by the trader and the orchid hunter.

The little vessel shivered beneath him. Her propeller slowly revolved. She glided past the village, and headed upstream.

“By Jove, they were off!”

CHAPTER XII



THE *Moltke*—such was her name—was as clean and cosy as a little yacht. In contrast with the *Bismarck* she was a miniature palace. They dined that night in a brightly lighted cabin, waited on by an Indian steward in a white jacket. The quarters were cramped, everything was on a toy scale, but Captain de Ruyter maintained the amenities of civilization in spite of almost insurmountable difficulties. The dinner consisted of several courses, each of them excellent; there were napkins, silverware, finger bowls, and black coffee in little cups, all in extraordinary contrast to Coffeecake's pell-mell housekeeping. There was evidently an understanding between Captain de Ruyter and Miss Westbrook. The former talked gravely on impersonal topics—the difficulty of keeping meat without ice, the tastelessness of monkeys, the delicious flavor of a certain kind of eel. The stout Hollander was a great gourmand, and, to judge from his random observations, devoted most of his attention to the galley.

It was strange to sit there—as Kirk did—and politely make conversation out of generalities, while questions rose to his lips he could not ask, nor even dare to look. Vera was as composed as though she were seated at the table of some ocean liner, with New York or Liverpool awaiting her at the end of the trip. She was in noticeably good spirits, and her laughter and gayety captivated Kirk, and soon caused him to forget everything in the charm of her presence; but

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he was mystified, nevertheless, and his eyes often sought her face in a sort of bewilderment. It was not lost on him that Captain de Ruyter treated her with the respect that bordered on servility. He would stop, even in the midst of such exciting sentences as "then you stoff him with chestnuts, and laying him—" at the merest hint of her wishing to speak or perhaps to motion to the steward for another roll. From de Ruyter's manner toward her she might have been a queen, and she accepted it as her right, greatly to Kirk's perplexity. She was not above enjoying the impression it made upon him, and assumed the rôle so sweetly and graciously that Kirk's heart ached with the sense of the gulf opening between them.

The next morning it was even worse. The captain had given up his cabin to her, and she had thus been enabled to draw on her trunks and make a toilet. She appeared at breakfast as radiant and dainty as though she had stepped straight out of Trouville. Kirk was : shed at the contrast he presented to her, in his serge trousers and flannel shirt. It seemed to exemplify a change in their circumstances that made it an incredible presumption for him to love her. She perceived his moodiness, and perhaps divined its cause, and unbent to him with so charming a grace—courted back his good humor with such sparkling glances and little caressing ways—that his bitterness turned into an unreasonable delight, and he forgot everything in the ecstasy of the moment.

The *Moltke* had left the Orinoco near the tumble-down settlement, and was steaming up one of its tributaries, named the Inirida. It was a shallower stream, but with the same densely forested banks, and its tortuous channels gave the effect of a series of lakes, one unfolding after another in an unending succession. Although the *Moltke* only drew four feet of water, it took careful piloting to keep her off

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the shoals and sand banks, and more than once she actually grazed the bottom and muddied the water with the impact.

Captain de Ruyter concerned himself not at all with this feature of his command. His energies were all directed toward housewifery, and the ship was left to run herself. There were some half-naked Coffeecakes to attend to this, leaving the indefatigable Dutchman free for more absorbing duties. He was one of those old maids of the sea to whom dirt is abhorrent. Cleaning and airing and scrubbing and shining brasswork never ceased on board the *Moltke*. And when he was not busy overseeing these details, he was either in the galley or wandering about with a pot of paint. Even when he took his rest in a hammock, he played with a pet monkey tied to the rail and ruminated on the next day's menu. He practically did all the cooking himself, and was never so happy as when beating a mayonnaise or sniffing at the oven door.

Except at meal times, when he exerted himself to talk, he appeared a stolid, uncommunicative man, keeping starkly to himself and repelling any advances. Kirk gathered that he had left the Dutch navy under a cloud, and had found a congenial exile in South America. Vera surmised that he had been probably making nudelins in the galley at some crisis requiring his presence on the bridge, or frying batter cakes when he should have been at his guns. There was no doubt as to which was the more congenial occupation to this naval hero, and it took no deep student of human nature to understand the reason of his failure. Kirk went below one day and discovered they were carrying a dangerous head of steam. The boilers were leaking ominously, and it was evident by the gauge that the safety valve was either faulty or overloaded. He reported the fact to Captain de Ruyter, who was sitting in the galley doorway stuffing a chicken.

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"So?" said the captain, with an air of bovine irritation at being disturbed. "So?"

"You had better come and look at it for yourself," said Kirk. "We'll be in the air in five minutes."

"Dat boiler was always troublesome," returned the Dutchman imperturbably, with his fist full of bread crumbs. "You go down and tell dat nigger to reduce pressure or I myself will descend and kig him."

Kirk modified the message and exerted a little authority on his own account, tempered by a couple of silver dollars. After that he visited the engine deck at intervals, and bribed the peons to keep the pressure needle within limits. Nobody resented his interference, least of all the captain, who never alluded to the matter again. The engine, like the ship, could take care of herself, and might blow itself into a million fragments for all the Dutchman seemed to care. His only interest in it was from the paint-pot side, and so long as it shone like a new pin he was placidly content. He was a strange creature, and at times Kirk thought him a little mad. But he was certainly a magnificent cook, and in this sphere of activity had no equal. Like many another man he had simply chosen the wrong profession, arriving at last by devious roads (and a court martial) at the place where he rightfully belonged.

During all those days on the Orinoco they had seen but little of animal life. But here, on the Inirida, they penetrated a more teeming region. The river swarmed with alligators, not lined up decorously like logs on the flats, but positively tadpoly with uncounted thousands. They were fierce, too, snapping at the garbage that was thrown overboard, and flashing their ferocious teeth as they rushed and fought in the shallow water. It was an unnerving sight, nightmarish, flesh-creeping. Worse still were the boas that attacked the

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live chickens de Ruyter kept in coops on the main deck. These huge serpents several times invaded the ship in the small hours, and the ensuing squawking, uproar, and clubbing was something terrific. The captain's only concern was the safety of his larder, but Kirk and Vera failed to share his matter-of-fact view of the situation. The thought of twenty-foot snakes crawling over the ship at night made their blood run cold. It was all very well to be told that boas were not poisonous and extraordinary cowardly. A brute over six yards long and as thick as a man's leg, disturbed the imagination. What if he broke in the cabin door, or insinuated himself through the screens? De Ruyter derided the suggestion, and built a nightly fort about his broilers. He turned in with the grains beside him, and would fly below at the first flutter of his pets. He confided to Kirk that "dem snages are a great big nuisance and no mistake," and indulged in some hair-raising reminiscences.

There were insects also to contend with: tiny ants with stings like drops of melted lead; jiggers that burrowed under the skin, and would only back out if ammonia were applied to the spot; flies of myriad forms, but each with some special power to tease or hurt; centipedes, hairy worms, villainous red-legged tarantulas. There was probably no place in the world so rich in multitudinous forms of life. But if the disagreeable side of this wonderland has been dwelt upon, it must be remembered that there was another: parrots of every hue of the rainbow; humming birds, as iridescent as jewels; gorgeous butterflies; troops of monkeys, swinging and swaying in the treetops; birds of beautiful and fantastic plumage, delighting the eye with a kaleidoscope of color; ghostly turtles, scurrying in hundreds over the sand at night; fireflies in astounding profusion,

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glimmering mysteriously in the glades of the forest, and outlining fallen trunks or huge decaying roots.

At dawn all nature seemed to awake and clamor. The forests, previously still, vibrated with the tumultuous uproar that thrilled the ear with innumerable tiny voices swelling into a diapason that was at once menacing and triumphant. The battle of the day was about to be resumed, the truce was over, and from every nook and cranny of those untrodden wastes there rose a clarion of defiance.

Kirk loved the dark, tranquil hour that ushered in the day. With an overcoat wrapped about him he would watch the shadows slowly melt and vanish, and wait expectantly for the first faint coming of the dawn. It never failed to affect him with a peculiar delight, and he regretted the time when flat and grassy savannas gradually usurped the place of forest. After three days' steaming they had reached a country of llanos that extended on either side as far as the eye could reach, vast billowing plains, parching in the sun, and as illimitable as the sea itself. The air became less stifling, less dank. From twelve to three it was as fiercely hot as ever, but infinitely more endurable. The wide view brought with it a sense of freedom, enhanced by the trade wind. Every morning it sprang up, to die down later on in the noonday heat, reviving again toward four to blow briskly until dusk. The sky, no longer a ceiling between two walls of forest, became a dominant feature in the landscape, with piled-up mountains of cloud rimming the horizon with fairy fastnesses.

Kirk would have been content to go on forever. What better had the world to offer him? To be near the woman he loved, to feel day by day her increasing dependence on him, to share those serene and delightful hours with her alone—what change could be for anything but the worse?

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He had no money, no position, no profession, no future; and the pathetic realization that the real prizes of life could never be his, caused him to cling all the more passionately to these fleeting moments. He was a man of thirty-two, hard-headed, and accustomed to look facts squarely in the face. He was no boy, entertaining childish dreams and presumptuously self-confident. In his more sober moods he foresaw he was laying up untold pain for himself. He would pay dearly for having raised his eyes to such unattainable height. Such a woman was not for him. She belonged to another world—a world that barred him at the threshold. What was he but one of the lost legion—one of those who salted the frontiers with their bones, on whose unmarked graves there would stand in after years the houses of those for whom they had pioneered.

He had his times of despair when, from the bottom of his heart, he regretted the fate that had brought Vera Westbrook and himself together, times when he kept aloof, in an exasperation of bitterness, determined to crush down the love that was devouring him. Love! What an ass he was, what a fool, what a dolt! He must free himself. He must draw back while he was yet able. He must hold fast to common sense, and put such folly by him. A man who had nothing to give had no right to ask. He was cutting, indeed, a most humiliating figure. Marriage! He laughed at himself sardonically. Had he said good-bye to reason! Why should he poison an exquisite friendship by these absurdities, and torment himself for nothing? Crying for the moon, that was what it was, when anybody but an idiot would have been grateful and satisfied. He took himself hotly to task, and determined to be wiser in the future. A man's will could control anything—even a sore and rebellious heart.

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But when he tried to put these resolves into practice he was met by unforeseen difficulties. His abruptness, his fits of silence, his spiritless and dejected air—all were provocative of the danger he wished so ardently to avoid. Vera suspected what was passing in his head, and her manner toward him grew softer and more caressing. Instead of taking offense or affecting a similar coldness, she set herself to win him back by those tender artifices that are instinctive in every woman. Like all her sex she loved to be loved. She liked Kirk well enough to wish to have him at her feet. Though her pride would have taken fire had he presumed to court her or openly arrogate the attitude of a lover, she was willing, in a thousand subtle ways, to court him. It tempted the cruelty in her, thrilling her with a strange zest. She did not grudge hurting herself a little in order to drive home her victory. Kirk was too sincere a man to turn these weapons against herself—to try and enmesh her in her own net. He perceived dimly that she was coquetting with him, and he shrank from the duel in which he had everything to lose. He knew well enough that if he ever reached an avowal their comradeship would be at an end. His silence was the price of that intoxicating intimacy which at the first word would vanish like a bubble. So he remained silent, marveling at the contradictory nature that was so eager to lure him on to his own destruction.

Oh, man and maid, can you never live in peace! Must you always tease and torment each other, and work forever at cross purposes? Is it not possible for man to be fire and woman tow, and yet leave out the devil, or Cupid, or whatever name we may apply to that third person in the transaction? Can you not accept each a piece of pie, like good children, instead of fighting for the plate?

Alas, no.

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So it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

It was well for Kirk's resolution that the *Moltke's* voyage approached an end. Perhaps it was as well for Vera Westbrook. In two weeks they had managed to get along without a quarrel, though Kirk was heart and soul in love, and she in the first disquietude of that insidious affliction. No quarrel—and no making up—love's armory not half drawn upon.

The announcement came at dinner, as Kirk inquired of de Ruyter why the ship was still under way.

"Aren't we going to tie up to-night?" he asked.

"No," said the Dutchman, noisily swallowing soup. "Slow down, dat's all, and bring up to Felicidad by midnight. You had better get ready to land, Kirpatrick!"

This was the first time their destination had been alluded to or named. Felicidad! Kirk liked the sound of it, and his wondering eyes sought Vera's in the hope of an explanation. But she avoided his look, and he forebore to press the unspoken question. It would soon be answered, anyhow. The captain hurriedly began to talk about Sumatra, and the delicious oysters to be found there in the mangrove swamps.

"No oysters like them," he declared. "Meld in your mouth. Meld in your mouth!" And with this as a beginning he rambled over the globe on a sort of oyster cruise, with a wealth of oyster information that was staggering. Kirk listened to it all as he might to the droning of a bee, his thoughts intent on Felicidad. What was this place? Who were those unknown employers of his that at last he was to meet face to face? What did they want of him? What could be the nature of an enterprise which was to take its start from this remote point in the heart of the continent? His curiosity, so long dormant, now took fire

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afresh. He was in a fever of anticipation. He saw visions of danger, of hardship, of extraordinary opportunities to be taken advantage of. He had courage for them all, the health and vigor and unshaken determination. These elemental qualities, so little thought of in civilization, are supreme in the wild places. It is then that a man stands out for what he is, judged only by the primitive standard. The thought stirred Kirk stupendously. Nothing was impossible—not even—! He would win her. He would win the hundred thousand pounds. He would conquer every obstacle! And if he failed, welcome then to oblivion and to the long sleep that has no awakening. All or nothing—a sublime resolve—old as man himself, and springing eternally from the same inspiration.

A sad evening succeeded dinner. Vera was preoccupied and said little. They had been so happy together, so happy—and now it was all over. They indulged in some mirthful recollections. They followed their acquaintance from the *Bolivar* to the *Bismarck*, and from the *Bismarck* to the *Moltke*, laughing as they brought back every little incident of their varied journey. But it was the laughter of sentiment, in which there was a note of tears, with long pauses between when each remained silent. Separation impended, strangers, a new order of things. Those long, bright days together, those enchanting evenings under the stars were fast fading into the past, memories, irrevocable, precious, not to be recalled without a pang. Kirk expressed the hope that the steamer would strike a bank, and thus delay the catastrophe of parting. Vera let the observation pass with a smile, and a denying movement of her graceful head, as though fate could not thus be trifled with.

Kirk felt for her hand in the dark and pressed it. She gently drew it away.

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"No, no, you must not!" she exclaimed, impetuously arresting the words which rose to his lips. "Let it end as it began—an idyll—untarnished, unvulgarized, ethereal as a dream. This is what made me like you—you have been so chivalrous, so good, so generous and forbearing. Don't disappoint me now when it is all over!"

"It has grown very hard," he said moodily. "I wouldn't be a man if I had not loved you. God knows, I resisted all I could. I've never cared for the rôle of the hopeless suppliant. I've tried all along to keep myself from slipping into that sort of relation toward you—not for your sake, not because I was generous, or anything of that kind—but because I'm a proud man who hates to humiliate himself."

Her face, beautiful and unrelenting in the starlight, filled him with a sudden bitterness. He leaned over the rail, gazing in dejection at the water below. She came over and nestled close beside him.

"Poor little Babes in the Wood," she exclaimed. "They tried so hard to keep the serpent out of their paradise, but the horrid thing would get in!"

Her tone was so contrite, so piquant, and tender that Kirk was disarmed. He had to smile in spite of himself.

"You are a dear, dear fellow," she went on. "Perhaps I had to resist a little bit myself. It hurt me when you said it humiliated you—to care for me. It isn't humiliating at all—it ought to be a liberal education."

They both laughed. Her charm was irresistible. Kirk was filled with a wild and unreasoning elation. It delighted him to wring that admission from her, however whimsically and mockingly she had put it.

"Now I must pack up and get a little nap," she added, and before he could protest she had fled and disappeared down the companion.

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Kirk remained on deck, smoking cigar after cigar in the darkness. He was in a whirl of conflicting emotions, undergoing all the alternations of happiness and misery. He knew not what to think—what to hope. But he was a dear, dear fellow. Those words repeated themselves exultantly, in soft and limpid accents, consoling him in his more somber moments of reflection. But he could not rid himself of the impression that she had taken farewell of him. That tenderness had been inspired by the impending change in their relations. He seemed to feel that he had been dismissed, sweetly, graciously, reluctantly—but still dismissed. It checked the presumption that her words had caused him. It was but natural, at the end of their singular intimacy, that she should let him down easily. He had been good. He had been chivalrous. He had acted, at any rate, like a gentleman, and she had thus repaid him in the only manner possible—a disquieting thought, indeed, obtrusive and not easily to be denied. Well, time would show—time would tell him—though the suspense in the meanwhile was hard to bear. Yet—yet——!

He dozed off and awoke again. The steamer was still moving. A glance at his watch showed it to be nearly one o'clock. Where was Felicidad? De Ruyter, always an incompetent, had probably miscalculated his position. The dim, flat landscape on either hand betrayed no sign of habitation. The splashing wheel turned monotonously, tirelessly, as though it had all the rest of the night before it. Kirk looked ahead for distant lights, but there were no lights—none, at least, save the sinking stars. It was cold, and he walked briskly up and down to warm himself, wondering whether to go below or to stick it out a little longer. He finally decided on his bunk, and descended to the lower depth. He was groping for the door handle when the ship suddenly

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stopped. There was a jangle of bells in the engine room, sleepy, querulous orders, the tramp of feet, a shivering impact as the vessel ground her side against a creaking wall of piles. Kirk ran forward, and almost fell into de Ruyter's arms.

"Felicidad!" said the latter grumpily.

All that Kirk could see was a small wharf to which they were being made fast. Whatever else Felicidad consisted of was hidden in the darkness. There was no one to meet them—no sign of life or animation. All was ghostly, black, and silent. Kirk got his bag and stepped ashore, joining the captain and Miss Westbrook, who were awaiting him. De Ruyter held a lantern which he raised as Kirk approached, yawning as he did so.

"Come," he said, and with that he led the way, Vera and Kirk walking obediently behind him. They took hands like children, laughing as they stumbled along, and making fun of the whole adventure. Kirk said that what pleased him most about Felicidad were the public buildings, though he confessed to be disappointed in the new opera house. Vera said she liked the air of spaciousness—the noble plan on which it had been laid out. Room, that was the great thing in a modern city. Room! there certainly seemed to be an unlimited amount of it. Room—if nothing else. To all appearance the captain was leading them across a trackless prairie, though in the blinding light of his lantern it was impossible to discern what might be before them.

"Who goes there?" rang out a voice, close and startling.

"Friend!" cried de Ruyter.

An indistinct figure was seen, rifle in hand.

"Is that you, Nash," inquired the captain.

"Bet your boots," replied the sentry, in a nasal and familiar vernacular, grounding his weapon and cheerfully shaking hands. Kirk and Vera drew a little apart, as there

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ensued a whispered colloquy between de Ruyter and the stranger.

"I'll go up to headquarters and report, while you take Kirkpatrick and find him a sheltered down somewhere."

"Sure," said Mr. Nash.

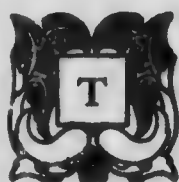
The party divided, Kirk following his new friend, while de Ruyter and the girl started off in another direction. The night was as black as pitch, but Nash strode on as though he could have found his way blindfolded. Kirk perceived a glimmer of whiteness looming large and vague against a denser shadow. Nash stopped and lit a match, revealing a large tent. Its front stood open, showing within a double line of cots, in which twenty men or more were lying down. They tiptoed in softly, guided by one match after another, searching for an unoccupied bed. They found a corner in the corner, and Nash whispered to Kirk to take his share.

"Happy dreams!" he said, and forthwith departed.

Kirk took off his shoes, and lying down as he was, pulled the coverlet over him.

So this was Felicidad!

CHAPTER XIII



T IRED though he was, he was too restless and excited to sleep. The heavy breathing all about him, the occasional snores, the gurgling and gasping of the man next him—all irritated his nerves and helped to keep him wide awake. The cot was narrow and sagged in the center. It was too hot above, too cold below, and he turned and twisted in unavailing efforts to make himself comfortable. Probably he would have fared no better in a feather bed, for his thoughts were too busy to allow him to shut his eyes and drift away into oblivion. At last these questions were to be answered that had so long distracted him. The veil was about to be lifted. He stood on the actual threshold of the mystery, which, with the rising sun, would be a mystery no longer. No wonder that he longed for daylight and could not coerce himself into even a momentary forgetfulness. He was tantalized beyond measure to have to lie there and wait for the leaden hours to pass. Several times he rose and crept out of the tent, eager for the first peep of dawn. He was fearful that it might come unawares and rob him of a single moment.

At the first indication of lessening darkness he put on his shoes and sallied forth. His watch, visible for the first time, showed him half past four. From the ground a mist was rising, unwholesome and malarious, earthy in its smell, and sodden with fever. It disappeared somewhat in the twilight of encroaching day, but not enough to give him an

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unimpeded view of the settlement. Tents and mist, tents and mist—that was all he could make out. Felicidad was a camp, military in its precision and regularity—a compact, hollow square of canvas, with an imposing center tent that could easily have housed a small circus. Kirk made the round of the settlement, peering inquisitively into the various tents. Some held nothing but merchandise in cases—salmon, lard, fruit, etc. Others sheltered machinery, crated roughly, wound round with gunny sacking, and apparently not yet assembled. It was impossible to determine what it was intended for. Kirk begrudged the time for a protracted inspection, and hurriedly passed on.

He seemed to be the only person in Felicidad who was awake at that hour, and he was overcome with a sort of awe as he looked in at cots and sleeping figures. These dim interiors had the bareness of soldiers' quarters. They were rough and comfortless, with clothes hanging, laundry fashion, from lines stretched from eave to eave. A kerosene case for a chair, a lantern, a tin wash basin—such was the prevailing furniture. Some of the tents were tied fast from within, forbidding entry. Others stood broadly open, concealing nothing—kitchen messrooms with board tables and long benches, a sort of office with a typewriter and a pigeon-holed desk and more storerooms. There was a carpenter shop, knee deep in shavings; a smithy, with forge, bellows, drills, lathe, and open chests containing mechanics' tools; a hospital, smelling of disinfectants.

Kirk next turned his attention to the central marquee, but stopped short, and then drew back as he heard the measured tread of the sentry. He had a vision of a man passing and repassing with a rifle on his shoulder. Tramp, tramp, tramp, and turn. Tramp, tramp, tramp, and turn. Kirk retreated. He felt like an interloper, a spy, and shrank

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from being challenged. He had a misgiving that he would be ordered back to his tent. He had to see more before that happened. It was still dark and misty, though the eastern clouds were reddening. There yet remained a few minutes more of freedom, a few minutes more in which to satisfy his consuming curiosity.

He made his way to the end of the white square, attracted by a sort of pole that showed fitfully beyond—a pole or flagstaff of immense height, elusively wrapped in mist. He walked fast, passing the last line of tents, and following a wide and well-defined track. He was excited. There now seemed to be two poles, together with mysterious cordage and yards high in the air—something shiplike and extraordinary that surpassed his wildest conjectures. He redoubled his pace. He began to run. But the mounting sun was faster than he. As it flashed over the horizon the mist rolled up like the curtain of a theater, vanishing with a startling suddenness in the first rosy beams of morning.

The sight that met his eyes filled him with an inexpressible astonishment. Before him was a vessel, a topsail schooner with the loftiest masts he had ever seen, resting, not on water, but on eight gigantic wheels.

It was a stupefying apparition. Kirk stood still, unable at first to do anything but gasp. Yes, on wheels twenty feet high, with tires eighteen inches wide—powerful and massive as though for the carriage of some giant cannon. But instead of a Brobdignagian cannon was a fabric of colossal proportions, surmounted by two powerful masts. A vessel of a hundred and fifty feet long, rigged, not for the ocean, but to skim the land. An astonishing conception, carried out with boldness and intrepidity. No oversparred racing machine ever carried half the spread of canvas of this monster. Her main boom passed sixty feet beyond the taffrail,

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and the sail itself was double the ordinary height. Her fore-topsail yards were inordinately long. The slender topmasts seemed to pierce the sky. She would not have lived an hour at sea, and as Kirk gazed up he wondered whether she would fare any better on land. This new seamanship was likely to be twice as exacting as the old. The man who sailed this towering mass would have his work cut out for him. To keep her on an even keel would tax him to the utmost, and he would find himself confronted by problems that none but he had ever faced before.

Kirk hurried on, the strange vessel looming up before him and growing vaster and higher with every step he took toward it. A wooden stairway gave temporary access to the lower deck, which was about ten feet above the ground. Kirk mounted it and found himself in a spidery cage of aluminum, a skeleton, so to speak, which had yet to be filled in. The framework had been finished to the last rivet, but the secondary stage had been hardly more than begun. Evidences of work were visible on every hand—planks, tools, great rolls of sheet aluminum, partitions of the same material in the first process of erection, cabins and passageways hardly more than outlined in a slender framework of the all-pervading dirty-white metal, with gaping interstices through which the sun was broadly shining.

On the upper deck things were less advanced, hardly a third of it being covered over. Kirk had to pick his way with care along the lanes of planks lest a false step should precipitate him below. Everything was in confusion. Machinery was stacked under tarpaulins. A temporary forge stood beneath the bridge. An eight-cylinder gasoline winch was in the course of installation abaft the foremast, and a number of its parts lay scattered about on sheets of canvas. A hundred jobs had been simultaneously going forward and overlapping

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one another. Kirk walked through a litter of boxes and barrels, cordage, tool chest, carpenters' benches, paint pots—a bewildering tangle of a thousand discordant objects thrown pell-mell together. There seemed work enough to last a hundred men a hundred years. The land-ship, so trim and stately from a distance, revealed on closer inspection a chaotic interior which was most depressing. She was hardly more than an aluminum shell—a delicate, spidery framework—requiring weeks of labor, possibly months, to make her habitable and ready.

Ready? For what? To sail those vast and billowy plains? Incredulity, keen and painful, overcame Kirk as he clambered to the bridge and looked down. Had he fallen into the hands of madmen? What an egregious undertaking—what an absurdity! And it was for this then he had traveled so far, and allowed himself to dream such dazzling dreams? The whole idea was so novel, so amazing, so unheard of, that his first sensation was one of frightful disappointment. Then, little by little, he began to reason with himself. What right had he to declare offhand that such a thing was impossible? He remembered that everything new had seemed impossible to somebody—to the most, in fact. The first steamer was an impossibility. The Suez Canal was an impossibility. The St. Gothard tunnel had been derided by the best engineers. Yet all in time had become facts. Possibly this thing he stood on was destined also to become a fact.

He realized that he had no data to go on, that it was a problem that lay outside his entire experience. It was a question of an enormous resistance having to be overcome by a proportionate-sail plan—a simple equation of the one against the other—only to be actually determined by experiment. But the weight to be thus moved was appalling.

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Looking down he was dismayed at the incalculable tons of aluminum that met his eyes. It was inconceivable to ever think of it moving. He was daunted afresh by the hugeness and slightness of the fabric by those crazy wheels that projected outboard so many feet, by those insignificant axles no thicker than his arm. Could they possibly bear the load? Could they bear the decks, cabins, water tanks, all in process of construction? Then there were people to be carried, food for the people, baggage for the people, weight to be added to weight with a staggering prodigality.

Then it began to dawn on him why the rigging and sparring had been completed before the hull. Evidently, as a precautionary measure, she had been tried under sail just as soon as the aluminum skeleton had been finished, a trial to settle and test all doubts and put the practicability of the scheme to proof. Why else should they have gone to the trouble of setting up the rigging and bending sails—a task which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been better left to the last. This was a reassuring thought, and was made even more reassuring by the sight of the wheel in the extreme stern. A series of wheels rather, four in all, sufficiently spaced apart to allow eight, or if need be, sixteen men, to hold the fragile monster on her course.

Kirk made up his mind to go aloft and see how things looked from the foretop. The shrouds were rattled down, thus making it an easy matter to lay aloft. It was not until he had begun to climb that Kirk fully realized the height of those masts. From the bridge they had appeared foreshortened and dwarfed, but now, as he mounted ratline after ratline, he appreciated that he had done them an injustice. He had seldom seen such sticks in anything afloat. The foretop loomed above him as high as a ship's royal. In spite of his eagerness he had again and again to stop

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and take breath. Like Jacob's ladder it seemed to lead to heaven.

At last he reached the top. It was canvassed in, breast-high, making it a sort of crow's nest. It was broad and comfortable, and a man could have swung a hammock in it easily. Against the mast were two flexible speaking-tubes that probably communicated to the steersman and to the bridge respectively. It was here from which the ship was sailed, then? It seemed a cumbrous method of giving orders, but there was likely no better way. The new sailorizing had exigencies unknown to the old. The sea, in a sense, was always level, and one was not required to pick out a course. But these vast plains, for all their appearance of flatness, were broken into hummocks, hollows, and outcroppings—not an acre anywhere that could be absolutely trusted. The outlook from the bridge was too limited for safety. But from the crow's nest a view could be obtained that stopped only at the horizon. For miles ahead the country could be unfolded like a map, and a way picked out with unerring certainty.

From that dizzy eerie in the sky he looked down on the sea of dingy yellow that stretched away from him on every side—so vast, so illimitable, so alluring in its immensity and desolation that he was held spellbound before it.

The sun had risen, flooding the eastern rim with fire. The ribbon of the Inirida gleamed like silver as it wound and twisted from horizon to horizon. The *Moltke*, like a smart tin toy, lay snugged against the wharf, seemingly tied to it by a piece of thread. The camp, also diminutive and suggestive of the playbox, presented a pretty and inviting aspect. Corkscrews of smoke were rising from the kitchens, portending breakfast and a general awakening. Kirk was exhilarated by the freshness of the morning, the strange bril-

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liancy and charm of the scene, the thought of wonderful things to come. He was in a glow of content. His forebodings vanished. The ship would surely sail, and he would sail with her, and it was a great old world after all!

The camp square began to cluster with figures. Tent after tent emptied its quota. Little groups formed and straggled toward the ship. They were all dressed in overalls, and the prevailing note of dirty khaki gave them the appearance of prisoners put out to work. Kirk counted upward of seventy men advancing toward him. He descended the ratlines, curious indeed to meet his new companions, and eager to fraternize with them. By the time he reached the ground he was face to face with the vanguard, who greeted him good-naturedly.

"Hello, Bill," said one.

"What's your name, old fellow?" asked another.

"Ain't he a toff!" exclaimed the third. "I say, boys, they've sent us a blooming dook!"

Others thronged about him. Kirk felt like a new boy at school. He was embarrassed under the stare of so many eyes. He was relieved by a little man bustling up who had an unmistakable air of authority, and yet withal so kind and smiling a look that Kirk was instantly drawn to him. He was about thirty, thin, boyish, and alert, with gold spectacles through which danced a pair of bright brown eyes.

"How do you do?" he said, putting out a hand as small as a girl's. "I'm Crawshaw—Lionel Crawshaw—and you are the new chap that arrived last night? Glad to see you. Hope we'll be friends. Now then, fellows, go on!" His tone was almost pleading, but Kirk noticed that he was obeyed promptly. He was an Englishman of a modern and

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little known type, the product of polytechnical schools and cheap higher education, a highly trained, highly specialized man who had never seen the inside of a college.

"You must go back and report to Captain Jackson," he said. "His office is in the big tent there in the center. I'm in charge of the engineering squad. Is it in your line at all? Hope it is, for we are frightfully short-handed. Oh, you've had a little experience with steam engines! Well, every little bit counts, you know—and you tell him I'll be glad to have you. If a chap has any aptitude in that direction I can always make him useful. American, eh? That's good. You'll take to it like a duck to water. You fellows always do—you and the colonials. Kirkpatrick—is that it? Lewis Kirkpatrick! Well, I must be off. Good-by. Don't let the carpenters nab you!"

With this final warning he turned away and scurried for the stairs. By this time the ship was reverberating like a factory. Hammers were flying, metal clanging, and the decks were in an uproar which gradually grew deafening. Seventy men were hard at work with a swing and a vigor that knew no union restrictions. There was none of that dawdling, systematized into a science, that preoccupies the main energies of the ordinary laborer. The ship was as animated as an ant-hill, and every ant was busy. It was a stirring spectacle, and Kirk lingered for a while, too absorbed by it to turn away.

But recalling Crawshaw's instructions he at length walked back to the camp, and directed himself to the center tent. The front had been rolled up, and seated at a solitary breakfast within was a tall, thin, baldish man in white clothes. There was something very stiff and formidable in his appearance. Martinet was stamped all over him, and his gray mustache and side whiskers fairly bristled with

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authority. Even his manner of devouring a banana was provocative and insulting, and he drank his coffee in angry little sips.

"Captain Jackson?" inquired Kirk.

He got a scowling look in reply.

"Mr. Crawshaw told me to report to you."

"Sir," added the captain, with a click of his teeth.

It was a moment before Kirk realized that he had been corrected.

"To report to you, *sir*," he repeated.

The captain looked him up and down, and then thawed somewhat.

"Come in," he said.

Kirk obeyed.

"Don't slouch like that! Haven't you a back? Stand up straight and salute!"

Kirk flushed, but he determined not to begin his first day in Felicidad with a quarrel. He gulped down his resentment and saluted.

"Now, my man," said the captain, "I want you to get one thing in your head before we go any further. I am Captain Horatio H. B. Jackson, late of the United States Army Transport Service, and I'm in command of this expedition. However little you may like it, you will have to submit to man-of-war discipline. Superior officers are to be saluted whenever addressed, and I will not tolerate slackness or disrespect. There is only one way to run any organization of men, and that is with an iron hand!"

He raised it—the iron hand—and twirled his mustache fiercely.

"Yes, sir," said Kirk.

"What's your name?"

"Lewis Kirkpatrick, sir."

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"You are the man that arrived last night in the *Moltke*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had any sea experience?"

"Yes, sir."

"Box the compass."

Kirk boxed it—successfully. North, north by east, nor-nor-east, etc.

"Navigate?"

"Yes, sir."

Captain Jackson made a note of it in a little book. Kirk's deferential demeanor had plainly made a good impression.

"We're busy just now in getting the ship to rights. Fitting her up and all that. There's hardly any trade that we don't need—and need badly. We want to use every man to the best advantage. How can you best help us?"

"Mr. Crawshaw wished to have me in the engineering squad, sir."

"Ah, very good. Then report to him for duty after breakfast. If you need anything from the paymaster's department, Mr. Crawshaw will make out the necessary requisitions. You will mess at tent number four, and they will see that you get a cot. You can go."

Kirk was glad to be dismissed. The captain's arrogance irritated him, and it had only been by considerable self-control that he had refrained from some sharp answers. But he was an old campaigner, and he knew how foolish it would be to start with the ill-will of his commanding officer. He would do what he was told, and do it smiling, however much it rubbed him the wrong way. Without being all things to all men, he would try to earn a reputation for willingness and good nature, and put a guard on both his temper and his tongue. These last are responsible for most of the

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world's failures. An ambitious man regards them as luxuries that he is too poor to afford. There was promotion ahead for somebody, and Kirk was resolved to be in line for it.

He had not the faintest idea of where to find mess tent number four. Some of the tents were numbered, and some were not, and there was not a soul in sight to ask. He sought the tent where he had slept, found it empty, and taking it as a starting point, walked along the canvas street, looking into every tent as he passed. He had not gone very far when he discovered one that was occupied. Seated on a wooden box was a fair, broad-shouldered young man in a nightshirt, engaged in patching the seat of a pair of trousers. In his right eye was a single eyeglass, so ludicrously out of keeping with his single scanty garment that Kirk could not restrain his laughter.

"Hello!" he said.

"Hello yourself," said the young man, in the pleasant and unmistakable accents of a gentleman. There was something so frank, manly, and engaging in his address that Kirk warmed to him at once.

"I'm looking for tent number four," he exclaimed.

"This is the very spot," said the young man. "Come in and I'll get you a cup of coffee."

"Oh, I don't want to disturb you," protested Kirk.

"No bother," said the young man, putting down the trousers. "The doctor has laid me off for a couple of days, but I'm glad to lend a hand and make myself useful, you know." He retired through the rear of the tent, and Kirk heard the rattle of crockery and the sound of a fire being poked up. A little later he returned, bearing a bowl of coffee, some lumps of sugar, and a big slice of bread and butter.

"You'll get a real breakfast at eight o'clock," he said. "But this will carry you on in the meanwhile." He laid

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the things on the board table, and impassively resumed his tailoring. "You're new, of course?" he asked.

"Arrived last night," said Kirk.

"How many?"

"How many what?"

"Weren't there any others?"

"Oh, no—that is—just myself." Kirk hesitated to name Vera Westbrook.

"How do you like Crazy-town?"

"It—it seems all right," said Kirk. "I haven't got my bearings yet."

The young man sewed steadily. Kirk drank his coffee, and took bites of bread and butter. There was something pleasantly homelike, almost domestic, in the scene.

The young man was the first to break the silence.

"You look a good sort," he said.

"I am," said Kirk, smiling.

"My chum died two weeks ago of fever," went on the young man, stitching hard. "It's pretty hard to have no chum, and all the best fellows have been snapped up. Why shouldn't you and I hit it off?"

"Love to," said Kirk.

"I'm St. Aubyn."

"I'm Kirkpatrick—though everybody calls me Kirk."

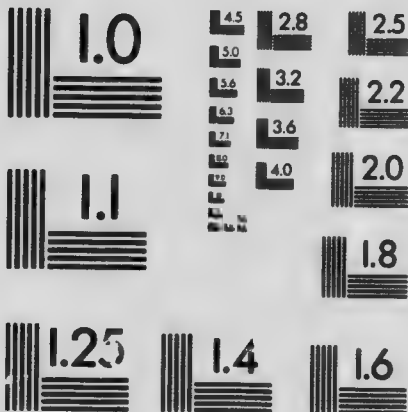
They shook hands on it.

"Now, chum," said Kirk, leaning his elbows on the table, "tell me all about this thing here—who are the people, and what's the ship, and what sort of tomfoolery is it, anyhow?"



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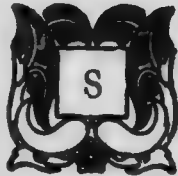
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CHAPTER XIV



T. AUBYN settled his eyeglass, laid the trousers on one side, and reached for a pipe that was stuck in a pocket of the canvas. He filled and lit it deliberately.

"Kirk," he said, "that's a pretty big order. Let's begin with what I can't tell you—the object of the whole business—the question that a fellow naturally asks first. The idea is to sail away somewhere after something. Nobody knows exactly what it is—none of us, at least—though the wiseacres say that it is an Inca's tomb, or an ancient gold mine, or an extinct mint. Whatever it is, it is situated in the No Man's Land to the southward—a country with hardly any game, not enough water to brush your teeth with, and a million savages aching to fight us. To penetrate such a region in the ordinary way is an impossibility."

"But what do the million savages drink?" inquired Kirk. "Beer, or what?"

"Oh, there's water, of course," replied St. Aubyn, "but the trouble is to find it. It's scattered about in dirty little holes that you can pass within thirty feet of and never see. Those fellows know where they are, and we don't. The only way is to carry your own supply, and that's why we are putting four thousand gallons into the *Fortuna*."

"So that's her name, is it?"

"Yes, the *Fortuna*. Well, you see, to get down there, lugging every pound of water and every pound of food—

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and all this, mind you, with a big enough party to fight its way through—is a job that couldn't be done with horses or oxen. A small party might make a dash at it, and trust to luck, but the risk would be frightful. It would be ten to one that they'd either die of thirst or hunger, or else be massacred to a man. Besides, even if they got through, how could they bring the stuff back? It must have seemed an insurmountable problem till some one hit on the idea of a ship. Here we have mobility, ample food and water, and cargo space for all the gold in the Bank of England. Kirk, it was a conception of genius!"

"If it will work," assented the latter. "But this business of putting sails to a traction engine, however brilliant it may be in theory, has a practical side that makes a fellow skeptical. Load her up with your food and water, put aboard your crew—and then, what if she sticks?"

"Oh, we've seen her do it," exclaimed St. Aubyn. "Gad, I never saw such a sight in my life. We tried her out a week ago, and she sailed like a bird. She was a bit sulky at first, but the moment she got moving there was no holding her. By Jove, chum, I wish you had been there! Nobody dreamed she would do it. I didn't myself. We all expected a fizzle, and the croakers were knocked silly. She went off like an arrow, with a rattle and a bang and a bumpy-bump that nearly jounced the heads off us!"

"How far did she go?"

"About a quarter of a mile."

"A quarter of a mile!" exclaimed Kirk. "Why, I thought you were going to say sixty!"

"One of the steering chains broke. It was too light for the work, and it snapped like a piece of string. We had to lower the sails in double-quick time, and just saved her from

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going over. But it was a great success. She can sail all right."

"Was she tried again?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it showed that she could do it. Once that was settled what was the good of wasting time? In fact, there was a big row at headquarters over it, but Westbrook was satisfied, and he carried the day. We are terribly behind-hand as it is, what with the sickness we've had—nineteen deaths in two months—and all sorts of heartbreaking delays and bothers. The truth is, old fellow" (here St. Aubyn lowered his voice to a deeply confidential key) "the whole affair is only held together by one man. He's the plank between us and eternity, and not much of a plank at that. It's my belief that the expedition may collapse at any moment, and that if Westbrook died we might as well pack up and call it all off."

"Westbrook? Who's Westbrook?"

"Oh, chum, a splendid old fellow. You must have heard his name. He's the great gunman—the Yankee inventor—who's been settled in England and making guns for the British Government for the last twelve years. Ezra Westbrook and Company Limited. The *Fortuna* was his idea, his invention, and he's the only one of our bosses who has any sense or any manners. A fine old chap, with a splendid energy that overrides everything—even his ill health. He was the first to get the fever, and has never really shaken it off. Poor old fellow, it's all he can do to totter about, and two months ago we thought he was going to die. But ill as he is, he is the master mind of the enterprise, and the one that holds things together. Without him it would all tumble like a card house."

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"Who are the rest of them?"

"Well, there's Jackson. You had a little talk with him, didn't you? That was enough, wasn't it? They say he was dropped from the transport service because of insanity. This was about his sole qualification to be put in charge of us—at least, nobody can see any other. He's a great big overbearing, domineering ass, with a genius for making mischief and inventing trouble. Not incompetent—he knows his business—he's all right when it comes to ships—but childishly vain, childishly pretentious—always looking for slights, and finding them. And worst of all he isn't loyal. He's been dead against the affair since the beginning. He makes hardly any secret of his incredulity. You can imagine how depressing that is for us fellows under him. It may be the most idiotic folly, but it doesn't become him to assert it. Not that he does so in words, but his whole attitude is one of hopelessness, and I-told-you-so. He made you salute him, didn't he? Well, we've had more rumpus over that saluting than in building the *Fortuna*, and there you have the man's character in a nutshell."

"Why doesn't Westbrook get rid of him?"

"Can't."

"Why can't he?"

"Because there you run against the widow?"

"Who's the widow?"

St. Aubyn laughed, and taking the pipe from his mouth, blew out a cloud of smoke.

"She's an old lady," he went on mirthfully, "a wonderful old lady, as rich as Croesus, and as cracked as a March hare, who has put up all the money. Mrs. Poulteney Hitchcock! By Jove, Kirk, it's a rum world and no mistake! There she was living in Paris, a rich old American with a million a minute, when somehow or other she met Dr. Von

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Zedtwitz, and got this bee in her bonnet. Heaven knows what it has cost her already, or what it may let her in for—though that's the least of it. She's a thoroughbred with her money, and never counts the change. Anyhow, she took up the scheme with volcanic enthusiasm, and never rested a second till it was in shape and moving. They say she went to Westbrook, sent in her card, and laid the problem before him. 'You're an inventor,' she said. 'You have brains, I have money. Is a land-ship feasible—and if it is, will you build it? I don't mind what it costs, but you must guarantee to have it work.' Westbrook tried to dissuade her. He told me himself that at first he regarded her as a lunatic and attempted to get rid of her. But she wouldn't be got rid of. She hung on. He took a week to think it over, and then began to get excited himself and see possibilities. At first he went into it more as a joke than anything else—a sort of scientific escapade, you know. But his interest soon changed into downright seriousness.

"You know the *Fortuna* is built of aluminum—and you know also that aluminum is the lightest metal that exists? Haven't you ever wondered why it is not used more? I mean in general engineering? Well, I will tell you. Nobody has ever been able to braze it properly—solder it together, you know. Oh, yes, it's done after a fashion, of course, as with airships and saucepan handles and such things—but not really practically. So far it has been like building wooden houses with tacks instead of nails. Well, Westbrook got that missing solder. Took him a year, but he got it. Ran it down and bagged it. It's a conglomeration of silver, copper, gold, and platinum, and the secret of it all will be worth a fortune. Crawshaw says it will put aluminum second to steel.

"Expensive? Well, I should say it was! But, for that

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matter, so is balloon silk for sails in place of canvas. You noticed that, didn't you? Oh, yes, to save weight. Everything to save weight. Hickory, bamboo, silk rope, nickel steel, Norwegian iron wire—every pound is counted. They even say that fat men will be discriminated against! Why, even our blankets were specially manufactured of the finest and lightest wool—the same idea, you see. Not even boots—only slippers! Light marching order, and nothing carried that can possibly be felt."

St. Aubyn stopped and puffed vigorously at his pipe.

"Now you know all I do," he remarked.

"Not quite," said Kirk. "Let's get along to Dr. Von Zedtwitz. You haven't told me about him yet. In the who's who of this business where does he come in?"

"Oh, he's our Columbus," returned St. Aubyn. "A Prussian Columbus with a Viking beard. A man about fifty—big, thickset, and paunchy. He's had charge of the transportation, and consequently till lately we've seen but little of him. The steamers are in his department, and the mails, and the whole task of getting things up here. It must be said that he has done it magnificently. 'My yob,' he calls it. He not only speaks Spanish, which none of the rest can do, but he has a smattering of Indian dialects. He knows all this country like the palm of his hand, and is one of those indefatigable, cast-iron, shove-it-along chaps that go at a thing like a bull. I take my hat off to Zeddy. He's a Teutonic whirlwind of capacity and enterprise. A bit coarse and rough, and often tipsy, but, by Jove, chum, he shines out in the general muddle like a diamond. If the *Fortuna* ever does sail it will be due to him and Westbrook."

"So those are our leaders?" said Kirk. "Westbrook, Von Zedtwitz, Mrs. Poultenev Hitchcock, and Jackson—is that right?"

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"Yes," returned St. Aubyn. "They constitute a sort of board of directors, with Jackson as the mouthpiece. There are a couple of more at headquarters, but they don't count particularly—McCann, the paymaster, and Phillips, the doctor. But those you name are the Big Four, as we call them. Though if Westbrook could manage it, it would boil down to a Big Three. He can't hide his dislike of Jackson, and has moved heaven and earth to get him out. But the captain is on the soft side of the old lady, and as she has put up all the money—or the best part of it—the brute sticks, and nothing can budge him. A shame, isn't it? The crazy ass will end by ruining everything, if he hasn't done so already. It makes me hot to think of it, because, on the whole, we've shown a pretty fine spirit, and have worked like Turks, and deserve to get some kind of a run for our money. To break up now, on the very eve of success, would be pretty hard, wouldn't it?"

Kirk nodded his head in silent assent.

An alarm clock went off in the rear quarter somewhere. St. Aubyn jumped to his feet, and even as he did so a flap was raised, revealing a very bronzed countenance, seamed and weatherbeaten, together with one hairy hand.

"Time to set the table," said the apparition.

"Come in, Hildebrand," cried St. Aubyn. "Here's a new chap—want you to meet him!"

The newcomer obeyed. He was a short, dark man with piercing black eyes, clothed in pyjamas, and with a cook's apron round his waist.

"Major Hildebrand, late of the Austrian army," said St. Aubyn, by way of introduction, "and the best cook in camp. Sad to see a cavalryman so reduced, but we've all come down a peg in Felicidad. Major Hildebrand, this is Mr. Lewis Kirkpatrick!"

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The pair shook hands.

"Welcome to camp," said the ex-cavalryman. "Hope you've brought some potatoes with you?"

"I don't remember seeing any."

Hildebrand went through with a boisterous pantomime of despair.

"I have a reputation to keep up," he said, "but how can I do it with nothing but can, can, can! That De Ruyter is a Dutch thief, and pilfers everything on the way. I will go down and pull his nose after breakfast. Potatoes or blood! I was promised sixteen crates, and if one is missing, I will call him out and shoot him, Austrian fashion."

The little officer looked quite capable of doing it, and he was expatiating further on the subject, with much noise and gesticulation, when a hissing in the kitchen caused him to dart out. St. Aubyn began to spread the table with tin cups and plates which he brought in on a huge tray. Kirk insisted on helping him, and together they soon had the table spread for twenty-two men. They were in the midst of these domesticities when the major popped his head in and wanted to know the latest news of the "crisis in Hungary."

Kirk did not know that there had been a crisis in Hungary, and for the moment was nonplussed. But he hastened to assure Hildebrand that it had passed.

"And Kossuth?" cried the little major. "What is the last intelligence of Kossuth?"

"Busy as ever," said Kirk solemnly. It seemed a safe statement, and committed him to nothing.

"He's a dirty dog," exclaimed the major, and forthwith disappeared.

A few minutes later they were invaded by a swarm of men who tramped in noisily and crowded the benches like a parcel of schoolboys, shoving and joking, as each one

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sought his accustomed place. St. Aubyn put Kirk between a six-foot-three Australian and a long-nosed Cockney Jew, and then bustled off to get an immense coffee pot with which he began to fill the cups. The major appeared with a platter of corned-beef hash and a capacious sea pie, both of which he served from an adjoining table with a celerity and dash that spoke of long practice. Above the clatter of knives and forks voices could be heard demanding: "After you with the milk! Here, Bobby, coffee! Say, old man, fill her up again, will you!" Bobby, as St. Aubyn was familiarly called, was kept on the rush, while the major circled about the table, grabbing empty tin plates and refilling them from the sideboard. It was a vigorous performance, interspersed with laughter and chaff, and if anyone were overlooked he yelled out the fact at the top of his lungs. There were twenty-two hungry men to be fed, and for fifteen minutes Bobby and the major had to dance. Then things gradually quieted down. Pipes, cigarettes, and cigars appeared. Plates were pushed back. Elbows settled contentedly on the table. Breakfast, except in the case of two or three, was over, and tobacco and lethargy was now the order of the day.

Kirk thought he had never seen such a remarkable collection of men. Individuality, character, resolution, stood written on every face. Aquiline features predominated—big noses and strong jaws. The majority were of a superior class, and many had the unmistakable accents of gentlemen. Anglo-Saxons predominated—Englishmen, Americans, Scotchmen, Irishmen, Australians, Canadians—all in the prime of life. Broad shoulders and deep chests were the rule, and the average of good looks was high. They were a handsome, fearless, reckless-looking set, superb rebels from the countinghouse and office, with none of the grocer instincts of civilization. The noble savages of their generation,

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who, after a more or less futile attempt to adjust themselves to money getting, threw up a struggle for which they were so little fitted, and hied themselves to the other end of the earth. There, at any rate, they found others like themselves, and congenial company, hardships, and dangers.

"Who's that chap over there?" inquired Kirk of the Australian beside him, and indicating a striking looking man with a scar across his cheek.

"Moulson," returned the Australian shortly.

"No, I don't mean his name. Where does he come from? What's his history?"

The Australian laid down his knife and fork.

"See here," he said quietly, "you're new to the camp. Take a word of advice. Don't concern yourself with what other fellows were back home. Savvy?"

"Oh, I didn't mean any harm. I—I——"

"It's the unwritten law, you know. Live and let live—that's our motto. And a bally good one, too."

Kirk expressed contrition.

The Australian looked mollified, and added, not unkindly: "What if you were to be put through *your* facings?"

Kirk judged it wiser not to say that he would not have shrunk from the ordeal. The Australian's air implied too plainly that people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

"I was a rotten bad egg myself," said the latter, shoveling in a mouthful of hash. "But what business is that of yours, or anybody's?"

"No offense," said Kirk.

"Won't mind my mentioning it?"

"Why, certainly not. Glad you did."

"It makes everybody feel more comfortable, you know. You'll find it so yourself. We don't ask any questions. We take a man as he is. It's the only way."

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"Yes, indeed," assented Kirk.

Then the man on the other side of him bore in—the long-nosed Jew. He was an agreeable fellow, with unexpected humor and refinement. He was a violinist, and expressed the hope that Kirk had some musical abilities. He had managed to get a little orchestra together, he said, and was always on the lookout for fresh recruits. Kirk, confessed, with some embarrassment, that he "sang a little." Cohen was delighted to hear it, and still more when he brought out the fact that Kirk had been the second tenor in a quartet. Kirk blushed at the recollection.

"It was only in Uncle Tom's Cabin," he said. "I was blacked up, and used to help out little Eva's deathbed with nigger melodies—the slave quartet, you know. We were supposed to be quite a feature of the show, and the audience—when there was any—certainly used to snuffle whenever we got a good whack at them. We'd tremolo the pathos, while a transparency revealed pink angels, and Uncle Tom being assisted into heaven!"

The ice thus broken contributed to further confidences on each side. Others gathered about them, and there was a general introducing and handshaking. Had it not been for the overalls, the rolled-up sleeves, the horny, calloused hands, Kirk might have thought himself in some pleasant club. There was the same good-fellowship, the same easy and cordial manners. Kirk liked his new companions, and they evidently liked him, and a pleasant fraternization made him soon feel at home. Apparently the land-ship and the object of the enterprise had probably become stale subjects. At least, neither was touched upon in their talk, which turned more on the trivialities of their every-day existence, with jokes and personalities that left Kirk somewhat in the dark. But he learned two things. "He" always referred to Cap-

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tain Jackson, and "she" to Mrs. Poulteney Hitchcock. "He" was the butt of everyone's scorn, and the laughter and derision was always the loudest when anything was told to his disadvantage. "She" was let off more lightly, and did not lack for defenders. The attitude of the mess toward her was kindly and humorous, and the shafts of their ridicule were not barbed. But the captain was the common enemy, the detested tyrant, whose vagaries, affectations, and domineering ways were bitterly assailed.

At nine o'clock, as they trooped back to work, Cohen enlightened Kirk as to the relations existing between "he" and "she."

"Jackson is playing a double game," he said. "The only treasure he is after is the old lady's money, and if he could persuade her to marry him he would drop all this like a hot potato. He's a schemer and a funkier, and deliberately makes every difficulty that he can in order to discourage us and keep us back. Of course, he dares not show his hand too openly for fear of scaring his bird, who, to do her justice, is the keenest of us all to pull the thing off. But drops of water will wear away a stone, you know, and as she is very smitten with him it is impossible to tell what may not happen. Can't you see how it all works out? His worrying about her dear, darling, precious health, and her worrying about his? He's afraid to make the great coup of getting the fever—pretending to, I mean—lest he might be deposed from the command and put out of harm's way. He can't count too confidently on the old lady, so he lets it go at rolling up his eyes and doing suffering martyr, the beast—besides setting everybody by the ears, and hampering us in a thousand underhanded ways. He's a low, calculating scoundrel, and we shall never move a yard if he can possibly prevent it!"

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"But can't anybody undeceive her about him? Show him up? Expose him?"

"Yes, Westbrook has tried to, and so did old Zeddy, but they were both too worked up to have the necessary tact—Westbrook never had much, and Zeddy never had any. It was rather insulting to the old lady to be told that nobody could care for her except for her money—and I fancy that was about how they put it. Their interference only did us more harm, for as they are now hardly on speaking terms with the captain this has doubled his chances of being alone with her. She's a queer old person, and rather likes being the storm center. The right way would have been to make much of her, and have hoisted the captain on his own petard. But they weren't Machiavellian enough for that."

Cohen sighed.

"Frankly," said Kirk, "what's your opinion of it all?"

"I haven't any."

"But will this contrivance actually sail?"

"It did once."

"And what are we going for?"

"God knows."

"It is a treasure-hunting business of some kind surely."

"That's the general impression."

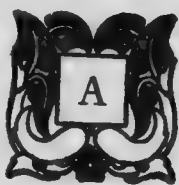
"But what do *you* think?"

"I don't think. I just go on from day to day—and wonder."

"Wonder at what?"

"At everything!"

CHAPTER XV



She drew near the *Fortuna* again Kirk's amazement was even greater than before. The audacity of such a conception struck him dumb. Her towering masts, her gigantic wheels, her lofty superstructure, at once daunted and fascinated him. The boldness of the idea, and the boldness of its accomplishment took his breath away. She seemed to have grown bigger, longer, more colossal in the interval of his absence. His mind had unconsciously dwarfed her in recollection, unable to retain the vastness of her bulk. The enormous fabric, looming high above him, stirred him as it might some runaway country boy at the first sight of a deep-water ship. He had something of the same surprise, the same awe, the same delighted bewilderment.

But he was given no time to fully satisfy these sensations. He followed his party aboard, and hastened to report himself to Mr. Crawshaw. The little engineer, in the center of a busy throng, was hard at work on his gas engine. The eight cylinders were in position, together with the drums, ratio gears, clutches, and other more important parts of a powerful gasoline winch. But the lesser details and adjustments had yet to be seen to, and these were claiming the energies of the mechanics. Kirk got a smile, an encouraging word, and then found himself on his knees with a pair of pliers in his hand, and the job before him of making fast a number of hose connections. Crawshaw himself was installing the mag-

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nets, but his eyes were everywhere, and nothing escaped him. No one had a chance to blunder. He seemed to see through the back of his head. His perky voice forestalled all questions.

"You've forgotten the shim, Joe! No, no, the other end, Charlie! Where's your washer, Bill? See that she seats right first—hammering's no good! Here, I'll show you, Kirkpatrick!" And so it went with an unvarying good nature that nothing could ruffle.

All about them was the clang of hammers, the tramp of feet, the ringing of metal, and the hoarse, confused buzz of seventy men hard at work—shouts, orders, sullen reverberations, the sound of tackles clattering, banging, forges roaring, anvils reëchoing musically under the sledge, drills crunching—an exhilarating pandemonium of vigorous and well-directed effort, not a blow wasted, and every man eager to do his best.

As the sun mounted toward the zenith the heat grew intense. A spare topsail was triced up by way of an awning, and roughly guyed out to protect the mechanics, but it served little to mitigate the ovenlike rays. Everyone worked in a bath of perspiration. The metal deck was roasting. The eyes were blinded by a persistent trickle of sweat. But still the work went on with the same determination. There was a breaker of lukewarm water mixed with oatmeal. The combination was supposed to be good for allaying thirst. But the men emptied it entirely, and called for another, and then another. The tinkle of the tin cup and chain was continuous. Some one was always drinking, and there was usually another waiting to take the utensil from his hand.

By eleven o'clock the forward winch was not only finished, but was in active operation. The lower-deck gangs had no longer to hoist up their material with a yeo-heave-

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yeo. The winch did it for them—the first load being received with cheers. Then work was begun on the after winch—the exact duplicate of the other—and by noon the bedplate was laid and securely locked.

There was a brass bell on the bridge, and it was rung loudly as a signal for knocking off. To Kirk it seemed the most welcome sound he had ever heard in his life. He was dizzy and faint with the unaccustomed labor, performed under such trying conditions, and his voice rose with the rest in a yell of satisfaction. This was one of the time-honored customs of the camp, and it was a point of pride with everyone to make all the hullabaloo possible at the first stroke of the bell. It had for them the added zest of something forbidden by the detested Jackson. It jarred on his rigid naval notions, and he had done his utmost to suppress it. But in spite of all his efforts he was met by a tacit rebellion, and twice a day his ears were affronted by that mighty shout.

Kirk followed his companions back to camp, where St. Aubyn and the major had a capital dinner awaiting them. The circumstances were much the same as at breakfast. The tin plates, the clatter, the languor, the smoke. The interval was longer, however, being from twelve to two. These were the most sweltering hours of the day. There was less talk and laughter, fewer stories. Many of the men stretched out on the floor and dozed off to sleep. Some even had places that had grown to be regarded as their own, and which it was bad form for others to annex. St. Aubyn, clearing the table, stepped carefully between the recumbent figures. The mutual consideration, the good-fellowship, the kindness of it all, struck Kirk very pleasantly. It was Liberty Hall, and everyone was allowed to do as he pleased. You could sleep on your head if you wanted to, and if you

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fancied some special corner it speedily became your own. You could borrow anything you wanted, and take it almost as a right. Men of the right stamp—those who have traveled and roughed it—fall very naturally into community life, and shed all the ordinary little meannesses and selfishnesses as readily as they do their good clothes. Such an association engenders the primitive virtues, and submission to public opinion becomes instinctive.

At two o'clock the order was given to turn to again. They straggled out into the blazing sunlight, and took the track for the *Fortuna*. It was a sleepy, yawning, listless procession, and none of them became really wide awake till the foremen marshaled them to their respective tasks. Then, as the clang and uproar recommenced they threw off their lethargy, and bent to work with a will.

The after winch was the rendezvous for Crawshaw's men. They assembled about it with their tools while the little engineer assigned them their various jobs. Kirk had grown more adept since the morning. He had got the principle of the thing into his head, and was consequently much better able to carry out his instructions. Crawshaw noticed his improvement and commended him. The praise did Kirk good. He felt less at a disadvantage with the others, and forgot the heat, the flies, and the dead stifling air. The approbation spurred him on, and he laughed and joked with his comrades, unmindful of anything but the task in hand. He learned incidentally that the engine they were assembling had been wholly built in France, weighed but seven hundred pounds, and was capable of producing one hundred and twenty horse-power, a marvel of lightness and strength. With the aid of the drums and a wire cable the *Fortuna*, if necessary, could extricate herself from any difficult place, and proceed, after a fashion, under her own power—at a

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snail's pace, of course, and at an unwarrantable expense of gasoline, but it was expected to save her, at any rate, from actually being stuck anywhere. In the event of a capsize the winches could be removed to the ground, anchored, and used to right her. The sails, too, could be hoisted by this means, and the men saved much heavy labor. Indeed, these two compact, economical engines were regarded as the most important parts of the outfit, and represented a wealth of potential energy.

By half-past three the Trades began to blow, and the worst of the day was over. A delicious coolness revived the weary and drooping men, and they bared their heads, and breathed in deep inhalations as the wind made the awnings flap and swept the decks with a welcome boisterousness. Ah, the wind—in days to come Kirk learned to wait for it with consuming eagerness. It brought life, strength, and courage. It divided the day from hell into heaven. Even in the most oppressive hours it gave something to look forward to, and therefore, like mercy, was twice blessed. The boys called it "the corpse-reviver," and some of the toppers even went the length of comparing it favorably with beer.

Shortly after the wind sprang up the noise on the lower deck ceased, and the ship became strangely quiet. Kirk wondered what had happened, and was on the point of inquiring of his companions when he was electrified to see a pink parasol emerging from the companion. He knew in a moment whose it was, and his heart gave a leap. Miss Westbrook appeared on the arm of an oldish, distinguished-looking man, whose pale face and thin, frail figure betrayed considerable physical weakness. He had a shawl pinned about his shoulders, and walked with the painful deliberation of an invalid. He rested at the head of the companion, holding to the coaming of the hatch as though to steady himself. With the pair

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was a third person, a woman of about sixty. She was of medium height, somewhat stout, with a dark, sallow, vivacious face, all puckered up with smiles. There was something mannish in the cut of her costume, and the bright feather run through her felt hat added a note of elderly skittishness. She had a tough, robust, weatherbeaten look that contrasted with the old man's evident languor and the girl's delicate and flowerlike beauty, and her incessant smiling, giggling, and grimacing affected Kirk somewhat unpleasantly.

There was a general stir at the sight of the newcomers. Work slackened, and everyone straightened up as though for inspection. None of the men had seen Miss Westbrook before, and there were subdued murmurs of admiration, and much covert curiosity as they gazed at her. Crawshaw came forward, cap in hand, and was introduced, blushing under the ordeal like a self-conscious boy. The others watched him enviously, and craned their necks to listen as the old gentleman said: "Crawshaw, this is my daughter—Vera, Mr. Crawshaw, my right-hand man." The old lady tittered genially, and made some jeering remarks that were inaudible. Crawshaw led them to the winch, and forthwith plunged into a technical discussion with his superior, while Mrs. Poulteney Hitchcock—for it was she herself—listened with a poll-parrot expression and a mischievous gleam in her crazy eyes.

Vera, demure and silent, seemed unaware of the attention she excited. She held to her father's arm, and looked about shyly, her face lighting as she beheld Kirk. He had been waiting for that glance of recognition, and wondering how he ought to receive it. He was unprepared for her coming over to him and extending her hand. He took it a little sheepishly, very conscious of their altered positions and of the astonishment of his companions. He was embarrassed

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at thus being singled out before them, and found some difficulty in answering her greeting in the same gay and cordial tone. But she had hardly more than said his name when Mr. Westbrook caught it, and turning away from Crawshaw, he also came over to Kirk.

"I am very glad to meet you," he said, a little constrainedly. "I feel under a great obligation to you, Mr. Kirkpatrick. Very much in your debt, sir—very much in your debt. If you could make it convenient I should be happy to have you call on us this evening. After eight—? Very good, very good—I shall look forward to it."

Then Mrs. Hitchcock bustled up.

"So you are Mr. Kirkpatrick, hee-hee! I'm the mother of the ship, you know, and you are the new baby, hee-hee! Over a hundred of them—like the old lady that lived in a shoe! What do you think of sailing over the land? But we'll do it in spite of the croakers! If only every man will do his duty, hee-hee! And we'll go home rich and live happily ever afterwards. Live in Paris, you know. No place like Paris. Don't you like Paris best—I do? *Très gai, très gai*—always something for every minute of the day! And how they'll lionize us! We'll be invited everywhere to tell about it. Afterwards I'm going to get Mr. Crawshaw to make me a model of the *Fortuna*—hee-hee—in miniature, you know—and put it in a special room all by itself!"

She rattled on in this queer, familiar, scatter-brain sort of way, never waiting for an answer, and incessantly nodding and grinning like a marionette. Kirk did not know what to make of her, and he was greatly relieved when the party passed on and mounted the bridge. Vera smiled to him in farewell, and her face expressed something of his own perplexity and surprise. The old lady seemed hardly better than half-witted, and it was disturbing to think of her being

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the mainspring of the enterprise. It took on a more ominous aspect, too, and he could not but marvel at the acquiescence of his companion in trusting their fate to a mad woman. He timidly expressed himself on the subject, but only got laughed at.

"Of course, she's crazy," said Crawshaw. "But her money's good, isn't it? And it's only crazy people, anyhow, who can take up revolutionary ideas and work them out. It takes a tomfool, mad-hatter sort of courage to back any new invention. Those hard-headed men you read about are always the last to get into line. They see all the difficulties, and are still discussing them while the idiot is romping home with his submarine, or wireless, or land-ship, or whatever it is. Then the hard-headed men begin to brag about the wonders of the twentieth century, and forget how they resisted them tooth and nail!"

This was received with a hearty chorus of approval. There was no doubt of Mrs. Poulteney Hitchcock's popularity. Her readiness to buttonhole anyone indefinitely was regarded as a proof of democratic spirit. She was generous, too, in righting any little injustices. She would always come and see you if you were ill. If you died she would cry over you. The universal judgment was that she was a "gay old bird" and a "brick."

At half past five work was knocked off for the day. As Kirk descended to the lower deck he was pleased to notice how much was being accomplished. It was possible to see something of the scheme of cabins, saloon, and passageways. The draughty oblong was being floored, screened, and divided. It was assuming a ship look, and the spidery framework was disappearing behind stretches of sheet aluminum as thin as paper. There were gaps for doors and windows, for ventilator shafts and skylights. On the ground below

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the ship, and raised on jacks, were two shallow water tanks in process of being built into the fabric—one forward, one aft, their weight being thus divided, and the strain carried near the trucks. Altogether a very respectable progress had been made for the day, and if it were to be maintained things would soon be in shape for the start.

Kirk went back to camp exceedingly content.

At supper, however, he had to endure a disagreeable amount of questioning and innuendo. Vera Westbrook was the sole topic at table, and though the talk was always within bounds, it vexed Kirk to hear her discussed so freely. The whole camp was buzzing with her arrival. It was the sensation of the moment, and a big one, and Kirk, as her fellow-passenger, came in for an uncomfortable amount of attention. He put on a stupid, artless air, and parried with a skillful bluntness inquiries that he could not well refuse to answer. To speak for her, to seem to champion her—he instinctively felt would imply a friendship that might do her harm. She had kept much to herself, he said. He had not presumed to do more than offer her the ordinary courtesies. She was a very nice young lady. It pleased him to see that he rather lost ground with his companions. He was plainly a dull fellow who had lacked the audacity to make good use of his opportunities. A chump, in fact.

The chump was very glad to be relegated to this despised class. He disliked to hear her name on those men's lips, and resented more than anything insinuations of the lucky-dog order. Yet to show anger would be to put the cap on his head. He was oversensitive, because he was much in love. He hated even to have his divinity admired, to hear her called a "stunner," to listen to all their extravagant speculations about her. The arrival of a young and exceedingly pretty woman in a camp full of men was calcu-

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lated to cause a stir. The mess could talk of nothing else, and Kirk was relieved, indeed, when he managed to get away and smoke a cigar under the stars.

At eight o'clock, dressed and shaved, he started off to make his call. He found Mr. Westbrook and Vera in their sitting-room tent, the latter reading an English newspaper aloud to her father. Kirk was greeted cordially, although a little formally, and was asked to sit down. He felt nervous under the old man's penetrating gaze, and his heart sank at the rather stereotyped expression of thanks that he was condemned to listen to for the second time that day. Every word seemed to widen the social distance. He replied as best he could, and grew acutely unhappy. There was no real warmth in the old man's manner. But he was an honest old man, and paid his debts. He wrote out Kirk a social check. The latter had a melancholy feeling that he ought to pocket it and go home. Vera was very grave and silent, though her eyes often sought Kirk's in a lingering glance. A conversation was with difficulty kept alive. Mr. Westbrook described the various experiments he had made to determine ground resistance in designing the *Fortuna*. It was all very abstruse and difficult to follow. The old gentleman got rather indignant at his stupidity. Kirk was given a paper full of curves, and had to effect an intelligence that was almost feverish. Altogether it was most depressing. He could not get the curves into his head. He answered every question wrong. He mixed up the coefficients of one thing with the coefficients of something entirely different. He sat there hot with shame, wondering what Vera could think of him.

She had never seemed so beautiful to him as she did that night. Never so remote, so utterly beyond those preposterous hopes he had cherished so guiltily in his heart of hearts. She

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was dressed in a kimono, dark blue in color, and richly embroidered with gold, which was open at the neck, displaying to perfection her round, white throat, and the classic modeling of her mouth and chin. It tormented Kirk to look at her, and yet he could not keep his eyes away. He ought to have concentrated every faculty in making himself agreeable to her father—in understanding curves, in brightening up at coefficients—but instead he sat there like a clod, with a funereal expression that not only wrote him down an ass, but a boor. It was the Waterloo of all his day dreams. He went down in his own estimation. Smarting with defeat, he would gladly have gone away to hide his diminished head forever.

Fortunately there was a diversion at the moment he least expected it. The flap of the tent was unceremoniously lifted, and a bulky, square-shouldered Teutonic individual with enormous whiskers jutting from his chin like tusk and a face contorted with passion, put himself half in, and beckoned vigorously to Westbrook.

"Why, come in, Zedtwitz," said the old man cheerfully.

"No, you come out," cried the German darkly. "It is not a matter for other ears. I have been again insulted by that infamous Jagson. He is blaying with me—he is blaying with all of us! Every day he thinks of some fresh means to thward us. Hunh! You know him—you know the peeg—you know what he is after! But the time has come to strige—to chegmate him—to end his interference and treachery. Come, friend Westbrook, and let us take gounsel together, you and I, for else assuredly I will get my pistol and put a pullet through him."

Von Zedtwitz looked quite capable of carrying out his threat. His eyes were smouldering, and his broad, rugged face was crimson with anger. Standing there in the lamp-

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light he presented a formidable figure, with his sturdy legs apart and his open shirt displaying the hair on his breast. A German of the Viking species, of the Bismarckian generation—arrogant, brave, and loyal—a volcano of energy, and an ill man to cross. Westbrook hastened to him. There was a whispered colloquy. The still, small voice of common sense on one side—subsiding Teutonic thunders on the other. Then the two men passed out into the night, and nothing more was heard of them save their retreating footsteps.

Vera rose and ran over to Kirk with outstretched hands. She had appreciated his mortification, his forlornness, his dejection. It was an impulsive moment of sympathy, of girlish tenderness, of sweet concern, for her poor lover. Kirk took her hands, and their touch transported them into a seventh heaven. He forgot the curves, the coefficients, even the interruption that had made a *tête-à-tête* possible. He drew her down beside him on the sofa. He bent over and kissed her warm, plump arm, kissed it and nuzzled it against his cheek in an ecstasy. She tried to free herself, but he clung to her hands and kissed them passionately, only stopping when she threatened to go back to her former place.

"No, you must be good," she said, glowing and trembling in an exquisite distress. "I didn't mean that at all—only I felt so sorry for you, and wanted you to forget. What a poor, silly stupid you are. Besides, I wanted to be pitied, too. I'm in disgrace!"

"Disgrace?"

"Papa is furious with me! I've had an awful time. I've been crying all day!"

"My poor darling."

"Hush, you mustn't say that. You mustn't even think it to yourself. Don't you see how terrible my eyes are—all

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swelled up and red? I was embarrassed every time you looked at me. I kept my head sideways all I could."

"And your adorable little nose in the air," added Kirk. "I thought it was pride. Disdain, you know. Aristocratic——"

"Oh, but listen—I want to tell you—no, no, I'll shut them—I won't have you look. Please, I don't like it—you mustn't!"

Kirk said she had exaggerated. That they were the prettiest, brightest, starriest eyes——

"But, no, listen."

"I'm listening."

"I've done a dreadful thing in coming out. Papa's at his wits' ends. He can't send me back, and he can't leave me here, and he swears he won't take me along. I'm a little white elephant—and—and—I'm glad of it. Oh, Mr. Kirkpatrick, he is so ill, so changed—that it breaks my heart. I am trying to persuade him to throw it all up, and go home at once. But he is so obstinate, so willful. In England he didn't take it so seriously. He used to laugh at it even when he was working at the plans. It was a sort of toy to him, a relaxation, an amusing mechanical problem. He and I used to play for hours in the attic, fanning little land-ships along the floor, and laughing like children. But now it's all different. He's absolutely absorbed in the idea. It dominates everything. You can see yourself how ill he is. I was shocked at the change in him. This awful climate is terrible. Yet he won't listen to a word of reason. I've been pleading with him all day. I can't tell you what I've gone through—how I've begged and implored him to give it up. But he's unshakable. He is going to sail in that ship if it kills him. That's where the inventor comes in, I suppose. His pride, his honor, everything—and an insane jealousy that grudges

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the glory to anybody else. He invented it, he built it—and he has to go, too! He says that's his reward. That he would not forfeit it for anything in the world. That it would look a coward to turn back now, as though he had not the courage of his own convictions."

She broke off and began to cry, rolling her handkerchief in a little ball and dabbing her eyes with it. Kirk tried to say something comforting. But the situation was too insoluble to be relieved by vague endearments, however softly they might be uttered.

"It's just this," she went on. "Either I go with him, sharing the risks and taking care of him, or we go home together directly. I have told him that a million times, and I'm going to stick to it. I don't care whether I'm a little white elephant or not. He's the only father I have, and I think he owes it to me to take care of himself. Don't you think he does? Surely your only child is more important than a ship? But it's terrible to argue with him when he is so ill and broken. Yet I have to. I must. For his own sake I must. Nag, nag, nag till I'm sick at myself, and all I accomplish is to make him absolutely furious. He has always been the kindest and dearest father a girl ever had. We have always been chums. This is the first time in my life that he has ever said a cross word to me."

"Can't you get the others to help you?"

"The others! That's the worst of it. They would be only too glad to get rid of him—Captain Jackson and Mrs. Hitchcock, that is. They are the most impossible people. The captain's only idea is to marry the old lady and return home—while on her part she is so fussy and dictatorial that there is a constant clash between her and papa. The captain, for his own purposes, makes all the mischief he can, and uses her as a cat's paw to drive papa frantic. She interferes in

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everything, and demands all sorts of impossibilities in spite of the agreement that papa was responsible for the ship, and was to have a free hand. But papa is too shrewd to be tricked, and he fights every inch of his ground, though it tells on him horribly, and jangles his nerves all to pieces."

"But there is Von Zedtwitz."

"The doctor! It's all papa can do to keep him tractable under the constant deviling he gets from those two. He isn't any help at all. And he's the most important man of all, you know, as he is the originator of the expedition and holds the secret. If we lost him we would not know where to sail to. And that's what Captain Jackson wants—to goad him and insult him till he finally throws it all up in disgust. Oh, it's an awful tangle, and if papa wasn't papa, I'd want him to stick right here and force it through. But being my father, his health comes first, and I would willingly see everything go to pieces—gladly see it—just to get him away. But he can't see it in that light. In some ways I can hardly blame him. It is hard to have got as far as this, and then sacrifice it all—to let that tricky Captain Jackson triumph—and leave it to fizzle out. I can see papa's side of it—only he can't see mine. It's such a handicap, isn't it? I have to admit this, and this, and this—while he admits nothing. Oh, dear, oh, dear, I'm the most miserable person in the whole world!"

"God knows, I wish I could help you," said Kirk.

She looked at him, her eyes shining with tears.

"I know you would," she exclaimed, with a gratitude he felt was undeserved. "You are a great consolation to me. I haven't anyone but you. You—you can understand."

They drew apart as they heard Mr. Westbrook's step outside. He entered, looking very white and perturbed, and threw himself wearily into a chair. He answered Vera's

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questioning glance in a voice that he attempted to make easy and unconcerned.

"It's all right—all right—my dear," he said. "I smoothed him down. I made him laugh at himself. He won't murder anybody to-night. He is a great, big, honest child, with all of a child's resentment of chicanery and injustice. But if they go on treating him like a dog somebody will end by getting bitten."

Kirk rose and said he ought to be going, but to his surprise Mr. Westbrook demurred, and pressed him, with some insistence, to stay a little longer.

"I'd like to show you the plans of the *Fortuna*," he said. "Vera, get them out of the other tent; they are in the long cannister beside my bed." Kirk sat down again, complimented, and not a little surprised.

He was in a state of exultation, his head whirling with intoxicating recollections that he tried to piece together into some coherency. He hardly knew how much he had gained. He was dizzy with wonder, with rapture, with what it all implied. The touch of her hands—something of her fragrance and beauty—even the caressing tones of her voice—all came back to him in the retrospect, and in the tumult of his senses he seemed to float away in dreams, his only formulated thought a passionate thankfulness. Mr. Westbrook spoke to him, and he spoke to Mr. Westbrook. What about he scarcely knew. He saw the old man through a sort of mist, benignant and courteous, and he only awoke to reality when Vera returned.

The cannister was opened and a roll of blue prints was taken from it. The prints were large and unwieldy and smelled of mothballs. It was not easy to spread them out, and the corners had to be weighed down with books. The table was not big enough, and so the floor had to be used, Mr.

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Westbrook leaning forward in his chair while Kirk and Vera knelt at his feet. Their hands met more than once, and parted reluctantly. Kirk's interest in the plans were genuinely unaffected. There was the *Fortuna* as she was going to be, and for the first time he appreciated the design as a whole. Everything was carried out to the last detail with a precision and foresight that delighted him. There was something very reassuring to him in the sight of those plans, elevations, and working drawings. They embodied innumerable experiments and long and careful calculations. The *Fortuna* was not the child of a haphazard enthusiasm, built conjecturally, and with anything left to chance. She had been evolved by a man of a trained mechanical mind, whose name in itself was a guarantee of scientific perfection. Kirk realized, more fully than before, how intolerable it must be to Westbrook to think of abandoning the enterprise on the eve of its fruition—to see all his labor and t' ght go for nothing, and his ship derided as a failure before it was even tried. It was too bold and superb a conception to be bickered out of existence, and he sympathized most heartily with the old man's determination to remain in Felicidad even at the hazard of his life.

Kirk was outspoken in his admiration. He had no intention of flattering Westbrook, and his sincerity was too transparent to be questioned. But the old man was very alive to his praise, and his manner thawed and grew increasingly cordial as Kirk pored over the plans and expressed his extreme satisfaction with them. When at last they were rolled up and put back in the cannister, Kirk could not but feel the advance he had made. No fond mother is more eager to have her child praised than an inventor the creation of his mind. On the engrossing topic of the *Fortuna* one was free to talk to Mr. Westbrook forever. He welcomed criticism so that

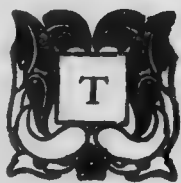
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he might confute it with figures and formulas. He was like a boxer who tells the pupil to hit him—if he can! Such a frail, gracious, excited old boxer, with his mellow voice and shaking forefinger, so patient, so earnest, so triumphant!

Kirk shook hands and said good night. Mr. Westbrook got his hat, and said that he would come, too—part of the way.

“I’d like to have a little talk with you,” he said. “I may not have another opportunity. There are several things, Mr. Kirkpatrick, that—that—” He did not finish the sentence. He seemed confused and at a loss how to proceed, fumbling at the shawl Vera placed about his shoulders. He led the way out in silence, while Vera, standing in the shadow of the threshold, looked after them both until they disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI



HERE are several things I wish to tell you," said the old man, "and the first is that I think you are an uncommonly nice fellow."

"Thank you," returned Kirk, not without misgiving at so strange and unexpected a preface.

"That is a very reassuring fact," continued Westbrook. "It makes it much easier for us to come to an understanding."

Kirk wondered what he meant, but forebore to ask.

"My daughter has done a very foolish thing in coming out here. It was a wild and impulsive action, which was to some extent justified by the news of my illness reaching her. I had not meant it to reach her, and therefore I feel myself partly to blame. I am horrified, less at what she has done than at what she has escaped. It was a most reckless and desperate proceeding, and it makes my blood run cold even to think of it. She has told me a great deal about yourself—about your kindness, your extreme consideration, your vigilance and chivalry. But, as a man of the world, probably I appreciate it even more than she does. You have put me under a great obligation. Mr. Kirkpatrick, I thank you."

Kirk murmured the appropriate things.

"This sense of obligation, this gratitude which I feel most sincerely, makes it difficult for me to go on. I hesitate to offend a man for whom I have so strong a regard. You will forgive me if I speak plainly?"

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"Why, certainly," said Kirk, not a little mystified. "Proceed, by all means."

"My daughter has placed herself in a very ambiguous position—a very cruel position, Mr. Kirkpatrick, though, of course, I have kept the knowledge from her. It is largely in your hands to stop gossip and chatter, and in appealing to you I feel I am appealing to a man of honor. By your conduct she will be judged. Do you understand?"

"Well, no," said Kirk. "I don't. Frankly, I don't."

"Well, it is just this, Mr. Kirkpatrick. These people here will have you both under a microscope. They will misconstrue you and your friendship. Malice and envy are rife here, as they're everywhere. Does it not suggest itself to you to make some sacrifice for my daughter's sake? To so govern yourself as to offset all criticism?"

"By what—by doing what?"

"I mean by staying away from us—by not calling—by losing yourself among the others and tacitly adopting their attitude. In this way the gossip will soon be silenced, especially if you are reserved and careful in your speech. Is it too much to ask?"

Kirk's fairy castle was tumbling about his ears.

"Does Miss Westbrook know?" he asked. "Is this her wish?"

The old man hesitated.

"I desire to be entirely frank," he said at last. "Of course she does not know, nor do I want her to. She is a highspirited woman, with all the courage and defiance of one who knows nothing of the world, and is consequently ready to disregard its venom. She has a great regard for you. She is artless enough to take it for granted that your friendship may continue. But, my dear fellow, it cannot. Surely, you can see that for yourself? When this is over—

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yes. But here, in this hotbed of tittle-tattle and slander, it is absolutely essential—for her sake, Mr. Kirkpatrick, for her sake—to acquiesce in what I am telling you.”

Kirk sighed.

“You will lose nothing by it,” continued the old gentleman significantly. “I am a man of my word. If this affair breaks up, you need not fear about your future. I shall count it a privilege to put you in the way of bettering yourself. When I said gratitude, I meant it.”

“Does it not occur to you that her—Miss Westbrook’s—feelings may be wounded? That she may feel slighted by the course you have outlined for me? Are you not making me appear very rude? You are good enough to put the favor on my side—but it is really the other way about. I’ve led a rough life, Mr. Westbrook, and her kindness and condescension has meant a great deal to me. I value it excessively. I cannot do anything that would lose me her good opinion.”

“Do you think that I ought to tell her?”

“Oh, you must!”

“Then the other is agreed?”

Kirk assented sadly.

“I should prefer to have it come from me,” he said. “It really does, you know, for it is I that will suffer. I would do anything for her, Mr. Westbrook—anything except to seem to wound her. It is a great blow to me. I was foolish enough to—to—” He broke off. Westbrook pretended not to notice his agitation. The old fellow had a pretty good idea of how matters stood, and was more than displeased. Had he failed to carry his point he had fully determined to throw over everything and return with his daughter to England. It was a hateful alternative, but he felt that he had no other choice. This affair had to be nipped in the bud, and

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if Kirk had proved recalcitrant, the *Moltke* would have slipped her moorings on the morrow with the Westbrooks on board. Dear as the *Fortuna* was to the old man, his daughter was dearer. He knew the folly of temporizing.

"I am trusting a great deal to your word," he said at last. "You appreciate that, I hope. You have an honest face—an honest voice—do not let me find myself mistaken."

His tone took off the edge of this remark. It had a deprecatory quality that purged it of offense.

"There is such a thing as keeping the letter of an agreement and violating the spirit. But I am taking it for granted that you're too sincere, and too manly to be unworthy of my confidence."

"Yes, yes, that's all right," said Kirk. "You've convinced me. I was a fool ever to think otherwise. It's the only thing to do—and, and—I'll do it!"

They shook hands under the starlight and then separated. Westbrook slowly returned to his tent, not a little relieved at the success of his endeavors. Kirk dejectedly sought his cot, and lay half the night with wide-open eyes, in such a turmoil of longing and wretchedness that sleep was out of the question. He had won and he had lost—and now it was all over. He had chained himself with promises, and the future was black indeed.

The succeeding days were too uneventful to be described in detail. Hard and exhausting work, periodically relieved. Glare, heat, clang, and sweat—noisy meals—and long silent evenings that he preferred to pass alone, far out on the prairie with no companionship but the stars. He saw Vera often, but had never spoken to her since that night in her father's tent. Every day she visited the ship, and would smile at him as she passed on her rounds with her father.

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It was a tender smile, full of vague messages for him, compassionate and beautiful, and mutely appealing. She had grown paler, more subdued, and her eyes, as they sought his, possessed a curious pathos that haunted him long after she had gone. Her father's prohibition had been hard to bear, and Kirk felt a somber satisfaction in the thought that he was not the only one to suffer.

The ship was progressing rapidly toward completion. The main deck was almost habitable. Doors and windows were in. Bunks, shelves, tables, lockers, racks, etc., were taxing the energies of the mechanical staff; aluminum wherever it could be used, and the only woods bamboo and hickory. The commissary department, under the direction of Mr. McCann, the paymaster, was arranging for the ship's equipment, and was accumulating mountains of stores beside her. Cabin matting was being sewed and measured, curtains run off on sewing machines, lamps unpacked and installed, a dozen men were at work on a suit of spare, balloon, silk sails. The upper deck was now trim and smart. Four Westbrook quick-firers, using .303 service ammunition, were in position, two forward and two aft, in steel shields. The chart room below the bridge was a miniature arsenal, the walls lined with Martini-Henrys and pasteboard boxes containing twenty thousand pounds of ammunition visible through wire screens. The galley was being finished and painted, a light, white rail was in process of construction around the ship, the companion ways, accommodation ladders, etc., were receiving their finishing touches. An astonishing number of trifling matters, however, had yet to be attended to—multitudinous refinements and conveniences, all exacting time and care—ventilators, pumps, a three-thousand candle-power acetylene searchlight in the foretop; water butts, cooks' range, and boiler; monkey-rail for the bridge; hawse

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holes; a cat-head for the kedge anchor; waterproof silk covers to protect the winches; hatches; a flagstaff in the stern, and a jack forward; and with these and other tasks came an unending sandpapering, varnishing, priming, and painting—a rubbing and scraping and polishing that was wearisome and tedious to the last degree.

But everyone was animated with the thought that sailing day was fast approaching. The *Fortuna* was almost ready for crew, freight, and passengers. The talk ran constantly on the absorbing theme of how many men were to be taken and how many left at Felicidad. It got about that the number to embark would be about fifty-five. Including the sick, there were more than twice as many in camp, and there was bound to be a weeding-out process that caused no little anxiety and commotion. Nobody wanted to stay behind. St. Aubyn managed to fool the doctor and get back on the active list. He was very shaky and ill, and had shivering spells when his teeth would chatter like castanets, but with indomitable courage he stuck to work, in the hope that his ill health would be overlooked.

There were many conjectures as to the appointment of officers and petty officers. Everyone was in the dark as to the selection, and the matter became one of constant bickering. The men with some sea knowledge arrogated these positions to themselves, loudly declaring that it took a sailor to sail a ship. This was stoutly denied, it being contended that the *Fortuna* was not a ship, that the problem of her management lay outside of sailorizing—that nerve and coolness and resource were the qualities demanded. Some even went the length of declaring that salt-water men would prove themselves the worst of all, and would positively be hampered by their previous training. It was often suggested, with much intemperance of language, that it

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ought to be put to the vote, and the question of leaders left to the men who furnished the bone and sinew of the expedition.

Indeed, it did not escape Kirk that there was a very widespread feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction in the ranks of the *Fortuna's* men. A fault-finding spirit was engendered by Jackson's dictatorial manners and exasperating, petty tyrannies, and, as in all mobs, demagogues arose to organize personal parties and fan the flames. The most noticeable of these was a fellow named Beale, a lanky Australian, with a most wonderful vocabulary of vituperation. But he was a past master in his nefarious business, and got together a very substantial following. It was he who suggested the vote, with the evident intention of heading the ticket. This undercurrent of politics and wire pulling was very distasteful to Kirk. He foresaw fresh difficulties and fresh complications. When all, as he knew, was trembling in the balance, it seemed a shame to provoke further troubles that, so far from thwarting Jackson, were likely to aid him in his desire to wreck the expedition in port.

Kirk told this to Beale very plainly when one day the plausible Australian drew him to one side, and attempted to enlist him in the ranks of the rebels. Beale was no fool, in spite of his officiousness and conceit, and Kirk was surprised at the impression he managed to make on him. In fact, Kirk turned the tables completely, and in a quiet way lectured Beale severely.

"What do you want to do?" he demanded. "Kill the expedition and send us all home with our tails between our legs? That's a fine idea, isn't it—because you don't like the coffee, and have discovered Jackson to be forty different kinds of a wild ass? See here, Beale, we fellows on the lower deck ought to pull together and show a good spirit. It's to

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our interest to do it. What are we to gain by upsetting the apple cart?"

"But don't you think we ought to know where we are going *to*? Or what we are going *for*? By George, Kirkpatrick, we might be a lot of children on a picnic for all they tell us. Now, man to man, I ask you, do you call it fair?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"I don't agree with you. That's flat, and you may take it or lump it!"

"Slow up, old man. The boys all look up to you, and go a good deal by what you say. This is a mighty critical moment in our affairs, and it rests with you more than you think to make or mar the whole expedition."

Beale, like all sea lawyers, was as susceptible to flattery as a schoolgirl. Kirk was willing to play him to the top of his bent. The fellow had a tremendous potentiality for mischief, and Kirk had to cajole him into good behavior. The occasion seemed to justify dissimulation.

"The great thing is to get started," Kirk continued. "Let's subordinate everything to that, old man. A rumpus just now would be fatal. We couldn't spite Jackson more than by acting like lambs. Don't you see, old boy, that he would jump at the chance of backing out—would welcome it! Mrs. Hitchcock would side with him—and then where would we be?"

"There's old Westbrook," said Beale. "Westbrook and Zedtwitz. Why shouldn't they carry it on—the pair of them?"

"It's the old lady's money, you know."

"Westbrook has barrels of his own."

"But I doubt whether he would consent to take over the arrears of the money already sunk. Think what all this must have cost! She would be too vindictive to make him a

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present of it. The ship's her property, Beale. Don't forget that."

"Oh, property!" exclaimed Beale contemptuously. "The deuce—what do we care! Who's to stop us?"

"You would find Westbrook would not put himself in such a box. He's pretty downhearted already, and the prospect of a lawsuit isn't likely to cheer him particularly. I know him well enough to say that. If the old lady made him a present of the ship and stores, I don't doubt but what he'd go on. But mark my words, she'll take her cue from Jackson, and will be so baffled and angry and disappointed that she'll probably blow the *Fortuna* to pieces with dynamite. That is, if you don't use your influence—and I know how much you have—to get the boys to hold back."

"There's something in that," assented Beale. "But my stars, Kirk, it galls me to have him put in all his little pets to strut the quarter-deck and domineer over us. There's Haines now, that sore-eyed son of a sea cook, bragging as how he's to be first officer. The pasty-faced little squit, I'd like to take him by the scruff of the neck and break his back! And the other favorites and toadies, all promoted and brass-bound, while we'll have to pulley-haul their dirty ropes, and 'sir' them, and take their tomfool orders!"

Kirk knew Haines, and disliked him profoundly. He was an ex-yacht officer of the flunkey species, who aped the supercilious manners of the class he had served. A drawling, red-headed nincompoop, with irritating airs and graces. Kirk's face showed his disgust at such a creature being put over them.

"You don't look so well pleased yourself," exclaimed Beale, with malignant satisfaction. "That comes home to you, don't it? Haines—oh, my Aunt Maria! No, sir; y—, sir; ay, ay, sir—and his grinning at you in stinking lace!"

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You back me up, Kirkpatrick, and I'll see that you and all of you get your rights. First, to be let into the secret; second, to elect our own officers; third, to put it to them, fair and square, man to man——"

"Not I," cried Kirk, interrupting him. "I won't do a hand's turn to make trouble or interfere. It's not only disloyal, but it's bad policy. I care for Haines as little as you do, but the only right thing is to obey orders, and go ahead."

"Perhaps you are expecting to move aft yourself?" sneered Beale.

Kirk flushed under the insinuation, but contrived to keep his temper.

"I don't want to come the little saint over you," he said. "There's a lot to criticise and complain of, but we'd be a pack of fools to engineer a smash. It's too high a price to pay, Beale. For Heaven's sake, let's make the best of it, and pull together."

The Australian ruminated.

"Well, go slow, anyhow," he said, with unexpected submission. "That's the sense of talking things over beforehand. They aren't all as cool as you are, Kirkpatrick. But you are right—you are right. It's no good burning down the factory to spite the owners, is it!"

"Not a bit," said Kirk, "and our own jobs, too."

"Wait till we get the factory out there," exclaimed Beale, with a sweep of his arm toward the southward. "Then we'll have things more our own way, eh, Kirk?"

"I don't know what you mean," returned Kirk. "I'm on the law and order side myself. That's my contract—and I'm going to live up to it."

Beale lifted his hat mockingly.

"Ta-ta," he said, "you've made me feel better man

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and a sincerer Christian. Ah, there is our true treasure if we only knew it!" He pointed to the sky in clumsy parody of a clergyman, and then walked off, chuckling to himself.

But apparently he had taken part of Kirk's warning to heart. There was less whispering and muttering in corners; and the latter, in many ways, became conscious that the wave of dissatisfaction was subsiding. Beale, at least, seemed to drop out of view, and his name was more seldom mentioned.

But Kirk was uneasy, nevertheless, and debated with himself whether he ought not to report the conversation to Westbrook. But he hesitated to add this new weight of trouble to that already overburdened man. He determined that later on he would put him on his guard. Forewarned is forearmed.

During these concluding days of the *Fortuna's* making ready, there occurred another matter that demands attention. Occasionally in the course of their work, questions arose that required a reference to Captain Jackson. This was the more necessary as the captain kept away and seldom visited the ship, except in after hours. The disinclination of the crew to rise and stand at attention as he passed was the reason for his keeping aloof. He attached an inordinate value to this formality, and after repeated failures to enforce it with man-of-war rigidity, he had at length retired from the contest in disgust. There was a general tendency, from Crawshaw down, to shirk the task of carrying him messages and undergoing his overbearing and insulting manners. Kirk, as a newcomer, was slyly victimized by the little engineer; and, as the former made no objection, he gradually became the go-between and messenger between the mechanical staff and their majestic commander. Often he had to beard the

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lion in his den three or four times in the course of the same day.

Now Kirk was as little in love with Jackson as with anybody, but he was free from the vanity of considering himself degraded by obeying his superior's orders. He was quite willing to salute, and say "sir," and bring his heels together—and found no mortification in the act. Privately, he thought it was silly to make such mountains of fuss over trifles; but, as far as he was concerned, he made no demur. It cost him no loss of self-respect to perform these mechanical acts. He was a man of the world, and used to taking it as he found it. He was there to do what he was told, and for the time being to subordinate himself to the will of others. Besides that, being a gentleman, it was natural for him to be polite; polite even to people he did not like; polite even to Jackson.

It all led to the extraordinary result of the captain's taking a fancy to him. His Majesty unbent. His Majesty, accustomed to a great deal of veiled insolence and a very perfunctory deference, appreciated the genuineness of Kirk's courtesy. He was insufferably vain and arrogant—but very human. He grew to like Kirk's open face, his agreeable voice, and his alert, respectful manner. Here was his man-of-war ideal, and as Kirk was the only one of a hundred and eighteen who in the least way satisfied it—except Haines and a few other particular pets—the swollen old fellow warmed to him mightily. It made Kirk feel a good deal of a hypocrite. But he was human, too, and he slightly modified some of his first opinions.

He little realized to what it was all tending. One day, as he stood at attention in front of Jackson's desk, the latter laid his hand on a closely written list of names with a humorous pretense of screening them from view.

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"No peeking!" he exclaimed. "This is a state paper!"

Kirk smiled vaguely. He did not know what the joke was, but it was discipline to look amused.

"You might happen to see your own name," went on the captain, pompously jocular. "Oh, yes—and in a good place, I can tell you. I am making up the list of officers, petty officers, and leading seamen!"

Kirk's heart gave a bound. He could tell by the captain's air that he had been marked out for promotion. For the first time he appreciated that Jackson's good will might mean substantial favors. Strange to say, it had not occurred to him before that he was a "pet."

"You're very good, sir," he said. "I—I—had no anticipation of this. I looked for nothing better than not being left behind."

"Kirkpatrick," said the captain sententiously, "the man who learns to take orders is qualifying himself to give them. When this is made public I fancy you will be surprised."

"Thank you, sir," said Kirk.

"And very agreeably surprised," added the captain.

Kirk kept this wonderful piece of intelligence to himself. It revived his drooping spirits, and consoled his lonely and aching heart. In his dreams he read that fateful list, and searched for his name with feverish pertinacity. He hardly knew what to hope for. He shrank from setting his ambition too high, dreading to disappoint himself. What he wanted, of course, was to be near Vera. To have the privilege of addressing her. To share, however humbly, the life of the afterguard. Quartermaster, gunner, boatswain, storekeeper—he ran over all the possibilities with an anxious particular-

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ity. Cook? No, thank Heaven, Major Hildebrand was sure of that rating. Hildebrand and Gaston Le Fevre. To deny either would cause a mutiny. Doubtless there were other positions? He racked his brains to think what they might be. Second engineer? Crawshaw would be chief, of course, with a seat in the cabin. Lucky Crawshaw! Second engineer would do capitally. The only trouble was that Henderson could not very well be overlooked. He had not a chance against Henderson. Henderson was not a "pet," but still the rawboned Scotchman was too competent to be disrated.

At length the time came for all these teasing speculations to be set at rest. One blazing noon, as they were tramping back to dinner, they were diverted by a great paper poster, six feet by four, that had made an unexpected appearance in front of the headquarters tent. Here was the list for all to read, in big black letters an inch high. It was instantly surrounded by a jostling throng, pushing and shoving to get close to it. There was a confused hum of voices, of ejaculations, jeers, protests, slaps on the back, and growling notes of disappointment and chagrin. Kirk elbowed his way in. It was a tantalizing and terrible moment. He was in the throes of an overmastering excitement. He dared not ask what he had been given. He expected every instant for some one to tell him, "Say, Kirk, you're one of the quartermasters," or whatever it was. On some of the returning faces he seemed to detect a savage resentment against himself—envy, anger, contempt. But perhaps that was only fancy. He got closer and closer. The letters were swimming before him, obscured by shoulders and heads. What if his name was not there at all? No, that was incredible—had not Jackson said——?

Ah, here it was!

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LAND-SHIP FORTUNA.

Directing Council: MRS. POULTENEY HITCHCOCK, MR.
EZRA H. WESTBROOK, DR. C. VON ZEDTWITZ.

Captain,

HORATIO H. B. JACKSON.

First Officer,

PERCY HAINES.

Second Officer,

LEWIS KIRKPATRICK.

Kirk got no further. "*Second officer, Lewis Kirkpatrick. Second officer, Lewis Kirkpatrick.*" In his wildest imagining he had never soared so high. It put him in the cabin—in the aristocracy of the afterguard—made him one of those glorified beings who might mix on terms of almost equality with Vera Westbrook, sit by her side, speak to her without reproach, share her radiant companionship. Kirk was dazed with delight. He was only aroused by the sight of St. Aubyn's thin, screwed-up, woebegone face.

"Oh, chum," he exclaimed, "they've gone and left me out! I'm not to go at all. I've got to stay in this rotten hole and kick my heels while you fellows sail away!"

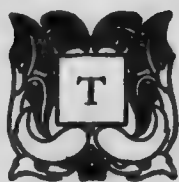
Kirk attempted to comfort him, but there was not much that could be said. St. Aubyn was pitifully upset. For days he had fought down his weakness, and by sheer grit had kept out of hospital and stuck to work. It had cost him agony to do so, but there was heroic stuff in the fellow, and he had been sustained by the hope of being taken. He had counted on it with all of a sick man's stubbornness and irrationality. And now the decree had gone forth, and he was condemned to remain behind!

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Kirk was still trying to soften the blow, when Haines came up and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Officers and petty officers are to report at the big tent to-night at eight," he said in his drawling, irritating voice, "to greet the Presence, and kiss hands. Ta-ta!"

CHAPTER XVII



THREE days later the *Fortuna* was ready to start. Her enormous and varied cargo was all on board. Her water tanks were full. Her accommodations were complete for the fifty-five human beings who comprised her officers, passengers, and crew. On the upper deck, lashed securely in place, were a pair of spare wheels, spare axles, and a dozen spare springs of gigantic proportions—all by way of reserve in case of accident to the trucks on which the fabric of the ship was supported. In addition to this unwieldy mass were forty specially constructed bamboo cages, compactly and powerfully built, which were intended, in conjunction with jacks, to be used in making repairs to the sustaining mechanism. The weight of the ship could be thrown on these hollow dice while axles and wheels were removed or broken springs replaced. Aft the foremast were two large automobiles, similarly lashed to the deck, about which there was more conjecture and chatter than even the mysterious purpose of the expedition itself. They were big French cars, with an unusually high clearance, and racing bodies. They presented an incongruous sight in a scene so wild and strange—so emphatic an emblem of civilization, in a landscape as savage and trackless as the sea. What was their purpose? Was it to be by way of lifeboats in case of need? The means of getting news back in the event of disaster?

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These perplexing questions were answered by a phrase that was fast becoming a commonplace.

"Well, we shall soon know now!"

Tuesday, the day set for their departure, broke stormy and threatening. The barometer had been steadily going down, and the prolonged spell of good weather had come to a sudden end. The wind was whistling through the rigging of the *Fortuna* with the strength of a rising gale, and the loosened sails bellied and thundered in the blast. It had been intended to make something of a gala of that momentous morning—with speeches, the firing of salutes, the dressing of the ship in flags, etc. At the right moment, amid cheers and salvos, she was majestically to move away, dipping her ensign in a stately farewell as she rolled south on her perilous voyage.

The reality, however, was miserably different. The wind had veered into the north and was blowing great guns. Squall after squall rose black to windward, and burst over the ship with torrential downpours of rain. Everything was wet and cold and dripping, and the lash of the storm fell mercilessly on the oilskinned figures clustered about the decks. Felicidad was half under water, and a dozen tents had been blown down, with the promise of more to follow. To leeward there was an incessant flash of sheet lightning, zigzagging the horizon with streaks of fire. Everything was in confusion. Inevitable things cropped up at the last moment to delay the start. No one was very sure, indeed, whether the attempt would be made at all. The captain sulked in his cabin, his dignity insulted by some unguarded word of Westbrook's. Emissaries of peace moved back and forth, arguing, explaining, smoothing down. Kirk, in rain-coat and sou-wester, paced up and down the bridge, waiting

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impatiently for orders. The gale was in their favor, and he grudged every minute that held them back. He was angered beyond expression at the lack of authority, the indecision, the precious time wasted in bickering and apologizing.

Beside the ship was the melancholy, bedraggled group of those who had to remain behind. Soaked to the skin, bunched together for protection, the sick and ailing sitting on packing cases in sullen defiance of the doctor's orders to remain in camp—they presented a picture of misery and desolation not easily to be described. In vain they were told to go back and try to keep their town from blowing into space. They listened apathetically and shook their heads. The only luxury that remained to them was disobedience. They stuck together like sheep, and passively defied the speaking trumpet. No amount of roaring could make them budge. They were determined to see the last of the *Fortuna*, and share at least in her departure. They were not going to be robbed of that, even if Felicidad were laid flat. The general sentiment was, that for all they cared, it might blow to Hades.

A quartermaster mounted the bridge, bearing a paper in his hand.

"Captain's orders, sir—you're to call the roll, hoist in the gangway, and see all clear forward."

Kirk went forward and roused the forecastle. The men came pouring up and grouped themselves about him, joined by the cooks and stewards from the ship's waist.

"J. Henshaw!"

"Here!"

"Thomas Mackay!"

"Here!"

"C. T. Hildebrand!"

"Here!"

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And so it proceeded, amid the rush and thunder of the gale, the ship shaking under the repeated buffets, and the men steadying themselves by the shrouds and backstays. It was a stirring sight—the storm-tossed hair, the brawny arms folded across Herculean chests, the bronzed and bearded faces, the unflinching eyes—the universal look of hardihood, recklessness, and courage. Here were no boys, no gray-beards, no weaklings. All were tried and seasoned men in the very flower of their age—broad-shouldered, deep-chested, muscular, and stalwart—the pick of ten thousand. No ship afloat had ever carried such a crew. The pride of leadership surged within Kirk. He vowed that he would show himself worthy of his promotion, and earn the respect and confidence of his erstwhile comrades. He realized for the first time the extent of the responsibility he had taken upon himself. It rested with him to show that he could bear it.

The captain was on the bridge, speaking trumpet in hand. At his right stood Haines. Behind them, well out of the way, were Westbrook, Mrs. Hitchcock, Vera, McCann, Dr. Phillips, and Von Zedtwitz—six black, clinging figures in mackintoshes. There was expectancy on every face—anxiety, excitement, foreboding. At last the *Fortuna* was to be tried, and that under adverse and dangerous conditions. Was she, after all, a gigantic folly, a preposterous conception, doomed to the most mortifying of failures? A few minutes would show. Theory and hope were now to bear the crucial test of fact.

"I have to report that the roll is called, sir, and that all hands answered their names."

"Very good, Mr. Kirkpatrick. Get the gangway up, and lash it."

"Very good, sir."

For the first time Jackson was beginning to show to

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advantage. His commanding figure, his harsh and incisive voice, his cool, resourceful air—all inspired confidence, and compelled some of his bitterest enemies to an unwilling admiration. He seemed to put by that meaner self—that touchy, cross-grained, half-hearted Jackson they had learned to know and hate—and asserted a side of his nature that had hitherto been unsuspected. Standing there on the bridge, conspicuous and masterful, he dominated the situation, and roared his orders with the authority of a man who had trod the quarter-deck for twenty years. His eyes were everywhere. He never vacillated for an instant. He knew exactly what he meant to do, and how he meant to do it. In the all-pervading confusion his undaunted mien and superb self-confidence were reassuring in the highest degree. The despised martinet, in the hour of stress, was vindicating his right to rule, and triumphing over his detractors.

The *Fortuna* lay in a fairly good position for the start. It had not been thought necessary to kedge her round to make a fair wind of the gale. It was blowing enough abaft the beam to insure her against capsizing, and once she was moving she could easily be set on a better course. That is, if she did move. As to this, nobody was very sure except Westbrook and Jackson.

Seven men were sent after the wheel—six to steer, and the seventh to be in speaking-tube communication with the foretop and the bridge. Haines was dispatched aloft with a couple of hands to con the ship. Kirk was engaged in taking treble reefs in the foresail and lower fore-topsail—no easy matter, as the loosened sails were caught by the gale and beat furiously as the men struggled and clung to them. The silk was new and coarse, and the wet had made it like sheet steel. It was only by taking advantage of every lull that the task was at last accomplished. The captain

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again and again through his speaking trumpet bellowed to them to make haste. The windward sky was blackening with another squall, and he was jumping to get away before it could burst.

"All ready, sir!" yelled Kirk.

"Man the fore-topsail halliards!"

"Sheet home! Hoist away!"

The sails shook and thundered.

"Tend the braces! 'Vast hoisting—belay! Man the jib halliards! Clear away the downhaul! Hoist away! Belay!"

The topsail threatened to blow itself out of the bolt-ropes. It seemed incredible that it could withstand the terrific strain. The *Fortuna* did not move an inch, but her wheels, deeply rutted in the soft earth, quivered with a sort of life. The vast fabric creaked and the backstays tautened ominously. It was a moment of suspense, of agony. Something had to give. Kirk held his breath and waited for the topsail to split to ribbons.

"Quick with the foresail! Up with her, Mr. Kirkpatrick!"

Thirty men laid hold of the throat and peak halliards and hoisted the sail with a rush. The boom crashed to leeward. The sail reverberated deafeningly, drowning for a time even the gale itself. Up, up it went, with a lusty yeo-heave-yeo. The throat halliards were belayed. The loose peak was lashing to and fro, spilling and filling with a furious noise. It was stubbornly conquered, and got into position.

"Haul aft the foresheet!"

The sail resisted, giving way only inch by inch. It carried the weight of the storm, and was likely to rip free and fly away. At every gust Kirk thought to see the last of it. But it was new and stout, and held grimly to the bolt ropes.

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Then to his amazement the deck beneath him began to shake and pitch. By George, they were moving! Bump, bump, bump—with men slipping and staggering all about him. But he had no time to look over the weather rail. His eyes were fixed on the captain. He steadied himself against the mast.

"Pull, you beggars, pull," he roared, as the long queue of men flopped over, and the sheet slackened in their hands. He ran in among them himself, and laid his own weight to the rope. Four or five others jumped to help him. Everyone was shouting and laughing with exultation. He had a momentary view of the flat, wet prairie speeding by—pools of muddy water—the diminishing crowd behind, waving their caps.

"That will do, Mr. Kirkpatrick!"

"Make her fast, boys! Now, you lubbers, what are you doing with that sheet? Here, like this!"

Then, at last, he was at liberty to see what was going on.

Reeling across the deck he attained the shrouds and sprang up the ratlines. Yes, indeed, she was moving! Her ponderous wheels were sending up a spray of mud and earth, and every time the great hull dipped by the head there was a slish as of some mighty automobile magnified by a thousand. Under that press of sail the *Fortuna* pounded on with a wild and lumbering velocity that brought the heart to the mouth. Lurching, groaning, discordantly protesting from every part of her fabric, and with a full gale behind her, she flew onward with an indescribable jarring and bumping that seemed at every instant to threaten her destruction. Braced against the rigging, holding on for dear life, Kirk had the startling sensation of scudding over the prairie. As the squall burst the *Fortuna* freshened her pace and dashed before it, amid rain and lightning, at a speed so terrific that there went

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up a cry to shorten sail. But the captain, swaying on the bridge, and searching the lee horizon ahead with his glass, held on undismayed.

Behind them were the tents of Felicidad, fitfully seen and half lost again in the murk and gloom. The poor, deserted fellows had shrunk to mere specks. One of them was waving a tiny flag on a stick—the only attempt to celebrate in any way the departure of the *Fortuna*. A pitiful leavetaking—that widow's mite of bunting, hardly more than a striped and gaudy handkerchief.

But the sight of it struck a responsive chord in the captain's bosom. He raised the speaking trumpet to his lips.

"Mr. Kirkpatrick?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Break out the ensign at the main!"

Kirk bellowed a repetition of the order. A quartermaster staggered aft to get the flag from the chart-room rack. Another cleared the signal halliards. The little ball went up swiftly and jerkily, all eyes watching it. Then, as it reached the truck, it was broken and blew out its vivid colors to the storm. It may be that it was not seen by those they were leaving, but the sight of the stars and stripes to the *Fortunas* themselves was salutary and inspiring. In a time of danger the assertion of coolness and discipline is always beneficial. This trifling act gave new courage to all on board. If Jackson could bother about a mere flag why should they be in such a sweat for their lives? There was no longer any mutinous outcry to shorten sail. A pipe or two made its appearance. There was a scramble to find sheltered places. Men grinned at one another, and even laughed outright as they were slung hither and thither by the violent and sudden movements of the ship.

And all the while she held on her way, four men s' ag-



"Lurching, groaning, discordantly protesting . . . she flew
onward."

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gling at the wheel, the sails straining madly, the wind howling, the indefatigable wheels racing and plunging as they cut into the sodden earth and tore a path to the southward. The ship yawed wildly. Kirk mounted halfway up the mast. His first feeling of dread had given way to a strange elation. It was magnificent thus to be borne along. Danger was forgotten in the exhilaration, the excitement, the thrilling delight of that mighty rush before the gale. Fear had disappeared. Life seemed as nothing in the balance. Standing there between earth and sky he gave himself up to the enjoyment of a sublime and extraordinary spectacle. Below him the crouching figures of his companions, the careening decks, the whirl of those steelshod wheels. Before him the vast emptiness of the plains, rimmed only by the sky. Behind him the fierce alternations of haze, gloom, and driving squalls, with rifts of wintry light and bleak, passing vistas of a tempestuous horizon.

Lightning forked and flashed with ear-splitting detonations. The heavens opened. The close-reefed sails strained furiously in the bolt-ropes with a menacing note of disaster—a hoarse and fitful murmur—as though any moment they might tear themselves to shreds. Jackson, with the speaking trumpet to his lips, attempted in vain to make himself heard above the storm. Hardly a word could be understood. But his convulsed face and gesticulating hand showed that something was amiss. He gave the trumpet to one of the men clinging to the rail beside him, and made unmistakable gestures to take in sail.

Kirk slipped down the rigging, and routed out his men from the nooks where they had taken shelter. The captain's motions were so peremptory that he judged it advisable to let everything go with a run, cost what it might. He let fly the fore-topsail halliards, and allowed the sail to beat

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and thunder while he applied himself to getting down the foresail. He put every man he could muster on the clew rope, and soon had the great sail on deck, where it gave them a lively tussle as it bellied and floundered; the forecastle men hauled down and stowed the jib. The *Fortuna* came to a gentle standstill. Her deck became solid underfoot, and the relief after the peculiar, jarring movement that baffled every attempt to walk, was indescribably welcome. Even at her smoothest running one could only move in little rushes, catching at a fresh support at the instant of letting go the old. A crablike progress, ludicrous to see, both irksome and dangerous, making the handling of the ship excessively difficult.

Kirk strode aft to see what was the matter, after first clewing up the fore-topsail with a dozen hands, and then ordering them aloft to furl it.

The captain met him at the break of the poop.

"Very smartly done," he said approvingly.

"Has anything happened, sir?"

"No, it's only those speaking tubes. Crawshaw will have to do something with them. Haines tells me that half the time he can't get the helmsmen to listen—can't attract their attention."

"Could you hear Mr. Haines yourself, sir?"

"Why, the thing only gives a little squeak. He might be yelling blue murder for all I'd know about it. What if we ran into a hummock or struck a gulley! Haines up there is no more use to me than if he were in a balloon. Find Crawshaw, and send him to me."

Kirk turned away, only to meet the little engineer himself. He was beaming from ear to ear. And this in spite of the fact that he looked half drowned, and the coat was half ripped off his back.

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"Isn't she splendid!" he cried. "Sails like a witch, and as smooth as a phaeton. Hardly know that you weren't on the water. I've been logging her, and would you believe it, she's been doing seventeen!"

The captain grimly brought him back to earth.

"We've been running blindfolded," he said. "Heaven only knows what we've escaped! More luck than good guidance, I can tell you. See here, Crawshaw, you've got to fix those speaking tubes better. I insist on it. We can't trust our lives to a tin squeal. Call them up aft, and see for yourself how rotten bad they are!"

Jackson's scornful and fault-finding tone angered Crawshaw. He pursed his lips together, and without another word went over to the apparatus. In their moment of triumph, of signal and assured success, it seemed hard to him that there should be no general congratulations, no handshaking, no exuberant jubilation over the wonderful feat they had already achieved. But the captain's sour face precluded anything of the kind, and even overawed the little party that were huddled together on the after part of the bridge. Besides, they were cold and dazed, and only just beginning to recover from the frightful jolting they had undergone.

"How long will it take you?" demanded the captain.

Crawshaw reflected.

"I'll have to rig up a sort of telephone harness," he returned at length. "One for a man here, one for the foretop, and another for the wheel. Say an hour. Yes, all of an hour."

"Mr. Kirkpatrick?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the cook to start his fire, and serve out hot coffee and biscuits to all hands. And——"

"Yes, sir."

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"Get that storm trysail out of the sail-locker, bend it, and be ready to run it up!"

"Very good, sir."

"Oh, I say," put in Crawshaw, "I wish you'd tell Gibbs and Henderson to look over the trucks and see how the springs are standing it. Tell them also to examine the journals, and make sure they're lubricating."

"Yes, you see to that, too, Mr. Kirkpatrick," added the captain with jealous authority.

Kirk darted down the ladder, and hastened about giving orders. The galley stovepipe began to smoke. The storm-sail was broken out and bent. Kirk moved hither and thither, doing energetic second mate—routing out skulkers, directing gear to be coiled, tarpaulins lashed, and the disordered decks straightened up. His eyes were everywhere, and he allowed nothing to escape him. He called up the lamplighter and set him to work. The binnacle lamps had not been filled, nor any of the companion-way lanterns. One of the scuttle butts had sprung a leak. He put a man to caulk it. He asked and obtained the captain's permission to run life lines fore and aft, so that when they were again under way the men might be able to move the length of the ship without being spilled into the scuppers. He sent one of the mechanics to report on the chains of the steering gear, and find out how they were standing the strain that had been put upon them. He overhauled the chicken coops, gave them an additional tarpaulin, and had the chickens fed. Found a fresh egg, miraculously unbroken, which he told Hildebrand to keep apart for Miss Westbrook's breakfast. Busied with these and innumerable other details, the hour passed swiftly by, and he was almost surprised when the orders came down to again make sail.

The gale was still raging, but their second start was

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less beset with terrors than the first. They knew now for certain what the *Fortuna* was capable of. The storm trysail, which was sent up first (the wind being now on the port quarter), steadied the ship, and as she gathered way relieved the two other sails that followed. The sickening, jouncing, teeth-chattering motion recommenced. The *Fortuna* plunged forward with an increasing acceleration, bumping and quivering, lunging, rolling, and sending up a spray of clods and dirt. Once more she was off, and everyone on board braced and settled himself for the nerve-racking ordeal that had to endure till sundown.

Eight bells were struck.

Kirk, gazing aloft, perceived Haines waving his hand to him. They had now to change places. Kirk, with the port-watch, was now to relieve the starboard. He sent his two quartermasters, together with five other hands, to take the wheel, two more to the bridge, while he, with Phelps and Haggitty, both dependable men with some sea experience, laid aloft to keep their watch in the foretop.

Haines and his two companions were very glad to come down. They were wet to the bone, and so chilled and cramped that their hands could hardly hold to the ratlines. To make matters worse they were all more or less seasick with the violent, whipping movement of the mast. Kirk watched them descend with some anxiety, and breathed a sigh of relief when they safely reached the deck. Phelps was put into the harness that Crawshaw had improvised. Kirk spoke through him.

"Quartermaster, do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Quite plainly?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your course?"

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"Sou-sou-east."

"Is she hard to hold?"

"Very difficult, sir. Bucks like a broncho. Jerks the fellows off their pins, sir."

"Shall I send you tw more hands?"

"We'd be very glad to get them. Could do with four, I think, sir."

"All right—I'll see to it."

Then he called up the bridge.

"Hello! Bridge! Can you hear me plainly?"

"Every word, sir."

"Tell Captain Jackson that the helmsmen are short-handed, and that they need four more hands."

"Ay, ay, sir."

Kirk took up the binoculars that Haines had left him, and swept the horizon.

From that great altitude the limitless, desolate plains seemed as flat as a billiard board. It required very close inspection to pick out hollows and inequalities of surface. But by dint of searching, and aided by Haggitty, whose eyes were sharper than the glass, Kirk gradually learned to detect bad places and avoid them. Haines simply allowed the ship to roll over everything, lickety-split, bump, bump, bump, with a slavish adherence to his course as though any deviation from it were a crime. But Kirk tried to ease the running all he could. Under his direction the vessel yawed to the right and left, with not only some increase of speed, but with a most noticeable improvement in her motion.

"Foretop, there!"

"Ay, ay, captain."

"I'm going below, and turn over the command to the second officer."

"Very good, sir."

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"You are to call me if the gale freshens."

"Shall do so, sir."

"Is it letting up at all?"

"No, sir—seems not, sir."

"How's it to windward?"

"Seems all clear, sir."

"Well, keep her going."

"Ay, ay, sir."

Kirk, leaning over his dizzy perch, watched the captain disappear. It gave him a strange sense of loneliness—of paralyzing helplessness verging on fear. The whole responsibility of the ship was now upon his shoulders, and he had no one to rely on but himself. He took a deep breath and pulled himself together. But if command had its terrors, it had also its delights. Swaying there in the sky, with one arm clasped about the mast, he was thrilled to think that his will was now supreme. On his skill, judgment, and caution was staked the safety of all. He redoubled his vigilance, and kept his eyes fixed on the unrolling savannas before him.

"Starboard a little!"

"Starboard it is, sir."

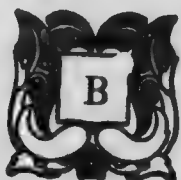
"Give her another point."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Steady! Meet her!"

"Steady it is, sir."

CHAPTER XVIII



Y four o'clock his watch was over. It was blowing as hard as ever, and the bleak, wild day was darkening fast. But the captain's orders were to press her to the utmost, and take every advantage of the favoring gale. The searchlight was lit, and its dazzling rays were projected far ahead, opening before them a path of weird and startling brilliancy. Kirk worked his way along the life lines to the aftercompanion, and staggered below to the cabin he had been allotted to share with Haines. He managed to change his clothing, and then all dressed, except for his stockinged feet, he wedged himself in his bunk. Sleep, of course, he could not. The motion was too racking, too violent for even the pretense. But he could close his eyes, and alleviate to some degree the fatigue of nerves and body so long kept at tension.

The day's work was practically over, for, although it would fall to him to stand the second dogwatch from six to eight, and then the middle anchorwatch from midnight to four, it would not be under the same arduous circumstances. The ship—blessed thought—would be still, and there would be no course to watch, no sails to worry over, and, best of all, an end to that cruel jolting that was the very acme of physical discomfort. Though he had eaten little breakfast and less lunch, he was not hungry at all. He was too tired to be hungry—too utterly worn out.

After a while—a long while—he heard the tramp of

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feet overhead, hoarse, inarticulate cries, the pounding of blocks, the fury of loosened sails thundering in the wind. The heavy, lurching, exasperating movement abruptly ceased. A heavenly peace took its place. The wind was still shrilling through the rigging, and blast after blast shook the ship, but in comparison with the miseries of the *Fortuna* under sail, the change was astounding. Kirk flung himself out at full length, his tormented frame free at last to lie at ease. Oh, the satisfaction of it! Oh, the glorious relaxation of weary muscles! How soothing the pillow that supported his tired head. His eyes closed. Respite had come at last. The long, long day was over.

He was awakened a little later by Haines. He sat up and rubbed his sleepy eyes. Where was he? He blinked under the light of Haines's lantern, wondering dully at the unfamiliarity of the cabin. Then his recollection returned, and he jumped out, getting down on his knees to search for his rubber boots. Haines was divesting himself of his oilskins, and was raining water all over the floor. He was surly and uncommunicative, growling out that it was a beastly dirty night as Kirk asked him how it was on deck.

Kirk went up the bridge, and added his hearty agreement to the description. The storm was blowing with unabated strength, with now and then a lull when rain would drown the decks and overflow the scuppers. A black, wild night indeed, wet and raw, with a deafening note of menace as the great gusts burst against the ship. The watch was cowering for shelter under the lee of deckhouses and freight. Most of them were new to sea routine, and their faces showed sullenness and resentment at being so unnecessarily exposed to the onslaught of the elements. Kirk was inclined to agree with them. But, of course, it was not for him to alter Captain Jackson's regulations. They

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were in an unknown and unexplored country, roved over by hostile Indians, and there was something to be said for always having twenty men within reach of the rifle racks. Though on such a night as that it was inconceivable that anyone should care to molest them.

Pacing up and down the bridge, Kirk gradually wore out the two hours of his dogwatch. Eight bells were struck, and he went below, happy to think that dinner was awaiting him. The main cabin was brightly lit, and in contrast with the desolation he had just quitted, it appeared extraordinarily comfortable, cosy, and homelike. The long center table had been cleared, except for a solitary place that had been set apart for him. At the end an American flag had been laid crosswise as though in preparation for a religious service, and about it were gathered Jackson, Westbrook, Mrs. Hitchcock, and Dr. Von Zedtwitz, all with their heads together, and talking in low and anxious tones. In their absorption they took no notice of Kirk, who gazed at them queerly, beginning to understand that some very disagreeable matter was under discussion. Their excitement, their heightened color, their angry and emphatic gestures, filled Kirk with vague misgivings. Westbrook held a crumpled paper in his hand to which he several times referred with flashing eyes and fierce, ambiguous whispering.

In a corner McCann and Phillips were pretending to play a game of chess, but it was evident that they were covertly watching the others. They, too, looked perturbed and ill at ease. Near them was Crawshaw, hunched over a book, in so intense a preoccupation that he seemed oblivious to the general appearance of alarm and mystery. Vera was absent, and Kirk's heart fell a little as he looked about for her in vain.

The steward brought him a plate of soup. Kirk swal-

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lowed it ravenously. He had forgotten until then how famished he was. The soup was followed by a curry of mutton and some admirably cooked rice. Hildebrand had served in the Chinese military service, and in some particulars had not altogether wasted his time in the Heavenly Kingdom. He had come away with the secret of preparing rice, together with a claim against the Heavenly Government for an untold number of thousands of dollars. Of the two the former had turned out the more profitable.

Kirk was busily getting away with his curry when he heard a rustle behind him. It was Vera, gliding to the seat beside him. She was very pale, and she leaned her chin on her hand as she turned and looked at him. She was smiling, and her soft lustrous eyes did not drop as they met his own. It was Kirk who faltered under that tender scrutiny, oppressed as he often was, and somehow hurt within, by the spell of her beauty. It was ever a fresh revelation, a fresh torment, filling him with a jealous rapture that grudged even the sight of her to another.

"Have you heard the news?" she asked, in a voice so low that it was almost a whisper.

"News? What news?"

"There's trouble forward."

"Trouble——"

"Hush—not so loud. The men have sent in a round-robin. A deputation brought it in at dinner time—four of them—that's what papa has in his hand. Wasn't it too bad, when we were all so happy, so delighted—and the whole thing so tremendously successful?"

"But I don't understand. What do they want?"

"They insist on knowing where we are going to. If they are not told they threaten to put back the ship. The whole conspiracy was hatched in Feccidad before we

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started. Treacherous of them, wasn't it—and so disloyal and underhanded! And the horrid things want to know what they are to be paid."

"It's that fellow Beale," cried Kirk. "He sounded me himself only a week ago, the rascally sea lawyer. I might have known that he was going to spring something on us. If I was Jackson I'd put him in irons, and by George, if they want volunteers to do it, I'll——"

"There's more—listen. They say that Jackson and Mr. Haines have to resign, and that they will elect their own officers."

"Their own officers, eh? Oh, I see—Captain Beale! A nice thing that would be! Well, I hope they gave them a stiff answer."

"No, they did not give them anything. We can't fight them, Mr. Kirkpatrick. How can we? There were thirty-seven names signed to it in a big round circle. Papa has asked them to come in and talk it over. He is only waiting for you to finish your dinner to have them all in here. I don't know what he has decided to do. He would not tell me when I asked him."

Kirk pushed away his plate.

"I'm done," he said. "I can't sit here and eat with half a mutiny on our hands. Steward, take away— Ought I to go over and speak to them? Would it be wrong, do you think?"

"No, no, let them alone. They're having an awful quarrel. I believe the captain is secretly pleased at the deadlock. He has always hung back, you know, and done everything he could to thwart us. He wants to do the talking, but papa won't let him. Papa is for compromise and reasonableness, and I believe he suspects that Jackson would intentionally try to make things impossible. The old lady taunts

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papa with being weak, and seems to think all that's necessary is for her to get up and give everybody a good scolding. Too bad, isn't it!"

"Hadn't we better get out of the way?" said Kirk. "It makes me fidgety to sit here and feel that I am prolonging the suspense."

Vera assented, and they both rose and went over to the side of the cabin, seating themselves near the chess players. It was the signal for the others to arrange themselves formally at the head of the table, a grim little party, with the light of battle in their eyes. The steward was sent on deck with a message. He had hardly been gone a minute before the bell began to toll on the bridge. It had an alarming, apprehensive sound. All talk and whispering ceased. There was a general air of inquietude. Then the men filed in, silently, as though daunted by the brilliancy of the great cabin and at their own presumption in invading it. An instinctive respect kept them standing. They massed together about the mainmast, some with folded arms, others with their hands in their pockets, others lounging carelessly against the bulkheads with an affected bravado. A formidable crowd, filling nearly half the cabin—brawny, muscular, and defiant.

Mr. Westbrook rose to his feet. His manner was that of a director at some shareholders' meeting—dignified, calm, courteous.

"Gentlemen," he began, in a deep, resonant voice, "I have here a petition signed by thirty-seven members of this expedition. It asks for some things that are possible, and others that are impossible. We trust your good sense and forbearance to hit on some kind of a compromise. You cannot go on without us—we cannot go on without you. There must be concessions on either side. It is inconceivable that a scheme so boldly projected, so laboriously

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carried out, so auspiciously begun, should be permitted to perish in ignominy. You wish to know the object of our search? Well, you shall be told!"

There was a hum of eager expectancy. Heads craned forward. The loungers straightened up.

"But on one condition."

Westbrook stopped and regarded them steadily.

"We will brook no interference with the control of this vessel. Captain Jackson will remain in command, Mr. Haines will remain first officer. We expect from every man of you his individual word of honor to obey them loyally and unquestioningly. If you are not prepared to concede this, the expedition is at an end, and we shall return to Felicidad and disband."

"Hold on a minute!" cried Beale, pressing belligerently to the front, and raising his hand for attention. "We don't think that Jackson is a fit and suitable person to have charge of us. Not only is he no seaman, but his inflated and overbearing ways——"

"Silence!" cried Westbrook. "Captain Jackson is not to be discussed. Another word, and I'll wash my hands of the whole affair."

"But——" expostulated Beale.

"I'll leave the speaker to the good sense of you men," interrupted Westbrook fiercely. "Such language is intolerable, and can only make matters worse. This is no time for personalities and insults. You have submitted a proposal—well, we meet it with a counter-proposal. That's the question for the meeting—and the only one."

Beale tried to speak, but was dragged back by his comrades, struggling and expostulating. There were shouts of: "Shut up, Beale!" "Put a stopper on him!" "What Mr. Westbrook says is right!" The big Australian subsided as

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he saw his men turning against him, and folded his arms across his breast in an aggressive submission.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Westbrook. "We shall tell you everything, if in return you pledge yourselves to support our officers willingly and cheerfully. Yes or no, if you please."

There was a shout of assent that swelled into cheers. The cabin rang with hurrahs. Beale, flushed and scowling, seemed alone in withholding his consent. He stirred uneasily on his feet, and his lips tightened as though in mute protest.

"Let us hear from the nays," exclaimed Westbrook, fixing a withering glance on him. "I have not heard Mr. Beale's decision. Considering that he is our principal critic his answer is important."

"I'm with the crowd," returned the Australian insolently. "If they are ready to put up with——"

"You're getting away from the point," cried Westbrook interrupting him. "You mean that you give your word of honor without any reservation whatever, to obey Captain Jackson and the other officers we have appointed? Is that so?"

"It is, if you carry out your part of the bargain."

"We are ready to do that now!"

"All right then," said Beale, in a choking sort of voice.

"Then, gentlemen, I shall call on Dr. Von Zedtwitz to put you in possession of the facts that induced us to embark on this costly and hazardous undertaking."

Amid a profound silence, broken only by the droning of the gale above, Dr. Von Zedtwitz rose, and solemnly regarded the assembled crew of the *Fortuna*—a bulky, impressive figure; his blond beard forking into tusks; his eyes deep set

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and piercing; his strong, harsh features suggestive of a mind as rugged as his face.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I shall make no apology for my English, which is bad, nor for my lack of descriptive power, which is, and always has been—poor. Sufficient let it be that you may understand the actual facts of this extraordinary, and never-before-heard-of enterprise. Fourteen years ago, under instructions from the Imperial Scientific Society of Heidelberg, I had the honor of guiding a party from the city of Quito into that unexplored region of the southern llanos. After many hardships and misadventures, we were one day set upon by a band of those savage aboriginals that had made this country the dread of the explorer, and the despair of those ardent thirsters after geographical, anthropological, and etymological knowledge, to whose efforts, in every clime, we owe so sincere a debt of scientific gratitude. They stripped us of everything, though they spared our lives, and treated us in other ways not unkindly. Unfortunately, thinking to beguile them and win their friendship I exerted myself to amuse them with my flute. It was a fatal action. I succeeded only too well. My companions they left, but me they carried with them away. Professors Engelhardt and Blumm contrived to retrace their steps, and reach the outposts of civilization. But I, on the bare back of a horse, was led by my captors into the recesses of their unchartered and unknown country, fluting for them to dance when we rested from the chase, or camped at night on the naked prairie.

"These nomad bands, during the dry season, roam at will over the vast stretches of the llanos. The multiplication of the domestic horse run wild, and breeding in incredible numbers, affords the aboriginal the means of rapid locomotion. Herds of deer, antelope, and cattle similarly escaped from the

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haciendas of the Guaviare give him the wherewithal to live. But when it comes the wet season, both man and game seek shelter in the hills, eager both to fly from this veritable marsh—miasmatic and deadly as a campagna of inordinate extent.

“I was carried, in the course of time, to a place called Cassaquiari, situated on rising ground to the southeast—at the first break of the prairie into low hills, that by gradations assume the character of mountains. Imagine my sensations to find here the remains of one of those vast and mysterious cities that ante-date the Christian era, and were possibly contemporaneous with Babylon and Tyre. Yes, my friends—enormous buildings of an antique epoch, moldering in decay, overgrown with jungle, in many cases mere, shapeless ruins lost to all form—the wreck of a perished and forgotten civilization. One could not move in those great courtyards, or view those fronts of fantastic carving and embellishment without an archæological thrill—those colossal erections of vanished hands—the work of artists and architects of no mean order, who had labored in the dim past to raise what was, perhaps, the capital of an empire.

“For three years I was captive with these savages, roaming the llaños in the dry season, returning periodically to Cassaquiari in the wet—but busy always, as you may be sure, to turn my personal misfortunes to a scientific account. I early recovered some of my instruments, a few of my books, my chronometer watch. I was enabled to make observations thereby, greatly to their astonishment, and my own satisfaction. I laid them for safe keeping in the only secure place I had—my head, gentlemen. I made systematic exploration of this ancient and half-buried city. I labored persistently, my determination unshaken, my curiosity ever on fire.

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"There was one building in particular, of prodigious extent, and of notable and gloomy splendor, on which I concentrated the major part of my efforts. Deep below in the ground was a labyrinth of subterranean chambers, empty, dark, and given over to bats and reptiles. They had so long been exposed to the ravages of my friends, the Piapocos, that naught remained of their primitive occupancy. Then it occurred to me to chart these carefully, in the expectation that, being laid out in a mathematical form of remarkable strictness and regularity, I might in this manner recover the architectural scheme, and know where to look for other chambers that possibly had been hidden and lost for forty centuries.

"I was rewarded beyond my hopes. This seeming labyrinth, when measured and drawn to scale, showed precision and exactness. I had now in my hand the key to the whole; and there only remained the almost insurmountable difficulty of moving *débris*, and tunneling to where I was confident of striking the continuation of a certain passage. Ah, gentlemen, it was an undertaking such as few men would have ever attempted! I had no tools but my hands, no helper save a female. But I was sustained by the conviction of ultimate success. I was as positive as though I stood before a door, and had only to achieve its opening. So I toiled and toiled, undismayed.

"We broke through. It was as I had thought, a replica of the side already open. With torch in hand, I penetrated those cavernous interiors, and trod beneath my feet the dust of bygone treasures. Ranged about me were great chests that crumbled as I touched them; great rolls, presumably of cloth, that fell to nothingness under the breath of the outside air; enormous earthenware jars, filling galleries a hundred and ten meters long, in some of which was

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honey as sweet and palatable as any I have ever tasted. I was in an ancient storehouse of enormous extent—an arsenal—a commissariat depot. In one chamber I afterwards counted over seven thousand bronze axes. In another, I calculated there could not be less than four hundred thousand arrowheads. And so it was with everything—the equipment of an Inca's army for thousands, many thousands, of men.

“Do not think this examination was the matter of an hour. I was confronted with many difficulties—poisonous gases, lack of illuminating means—above all, what I might call my professional engagements that made irritating demands on my time. Constantly I had to play the flute. They were insatiable for my humble efforts. Once, to my horror, a passing tribe attempted to purchase me. Modesty forbids me to tell you the exorbitant price that tempted the cupidity of my captors. Rifles and young virgins—the currency of the *llaños*—were offered to a staggering amount. I was seated on a rock, and made to perform while the haggling went on. I did so as poorly as I could, but all to no effect. The bargain was clinched, and I was carried away. But my former friends, with a treachery I cannot too highly commend—with a commercial instinct quite in accordance with the civilized traditions of to-day—waylaid us two nights afterwards; and with the aid of the rifles thus dishonorably obtained, fusilladed my purchasers, and recovered my possession. So narrow was thus the margin by which I am free to stand before you to-night!

“I resumed my explorations. I shall not weary you with the details of them. I will come to that extraordinary moment when I attained a high and vaulted chamber, and found myself in the actual strong-room of the citadel. Here were ingots of metal, compactly stacked in serried rows that

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reached the ceiling. I took one up. Gentlemen, it was a bar of gold!"

The doctor paused as though to enjoy the sensation of his announcement. Nor was he disappointed. The company, breathless and silent, had been standing like statues under the spell of a dawning comprehension. Now, with a sudden, ungovernable impulse, they broke into cheers. Again and again there arose a mighty shout that deafened the cabin and shook the skylights overhead.

"Zeddy, forever! Hurrah for Zeddy! Now, boys, all together, hip, hip——!"

The uproar was quelled by the doctor's upraised hand.

"To resume," he said. "Yes, gentlemen, a bar of gold! Even with my imperfect means of verification, I soon satisfied myself of its integrity. Then I set myself painstakingly to determine the value of my discovery. It was at best but a crude estimate; but, with scientific conservatism, I erred, if at all, on the side of caution. In that vault there lies to-day between four and five hundred ingots of gold of a minimum value of forty millions of marks, or, in American money, almost ten millions of dollars!

"In the succeeding year, beginning the fourth of my captivity, there was a season of such excessive drought that we were threatened with starvation. Game, formerly so plentiful, had all but disappeared. The parched savannas were whitened with the bones of those immense herds that had fallen and died in uncounted thousands. We had split up into small parties, the better to subsist, and some, including my own, boldly penetrated to the northward, hoping to do better on the banks of the rivers. We reached the Inirida. Here at last was my opportunity, desperate and full of peril though it was. One night I fled and proceeded to follow down the river. I lived on what fish I caught, and at night

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slept in trees to guard myself from tigers. Ten days I existed thus, with diminishing strength and many sad reflections on my foolhardiness. Then, in my last extremity, I was so fortunate as to fall in with a party of Mitua Indians, who were descending the stream in a canoe. These brought me to San Fernando de Anabapo, from whence in due course, and after many tedious delays, I returned to my native Heidelberg.

"As to the treasure I said nothing. I cherished dreams of some day returning, and in the intervals of my professorial duties at Heidelberg—where I became assistant lecturer on the prehistoric races of South America—I turned over many projects, which one by one I had to give up as unfeasible. The problem of transporting such a mass of metal through a hostile, almost waterless desert, appeared insurmountable. This colossal weight, requiring four hundred pack horses to bear it, and an attendant army to defend it, defied every endeavor of my imagination. No means suggested itself to me by which success might be achieved. Yet I said nothing. I kept my secret buried in my bosom. But I pondered incessantly—and in vain.

"One day in Paris, at the house of our mutual friend, the justly celebrated and world-famed Max Nordau, I had the great honor and good fortune to be presented to Mrs. Poulteney Hitchcock. This gracious lady put many questions to me about Cassaquiari, and betrayed an interest so eager, so sympathetic, that after repeated visits to her charming salon, I at last unfolded to her my perplexities and besought her aid.

"From there, gentlemen, I need go no further. You stand here to-night the living witnesses of what was next to happen. Thanks to this noble lady's energy and money, to Mr. Westbrook's inventive genius, and to my own humble

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though ardent coöperation, this daring and audacious scheme was successfully incepted. It rests with you to carry it to a triumphant conclusion, and, God willing, we shall soon return to Felicidad like a galleon of old Spain, deep-laden with the plundered treasures of the Incas!"

He took his seat amid the new outbursts of cheering. The men, in their enthusiasm, pressed forward and crowded about him—clapping him on the back, shaking his hands, and lustily vociferating their good will with lungs of brass. It was some time before Westbrook, beating his fist on the table for silence, was at last able to make his voice heard above the din.

"Please, please," he protested. "Gentlemen, come to order!"

The noise subsided. The men scrambled back to their former positions about the mainmast, laughing and skylarking with boisterous good nature. They were bubbling over with high spirits, and were as unruly as a pack of schoolboys.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Westbrook, "let us proceed to financial details. Doubtless you will be interested in the proposed division of our profits. If Mr. Allen would kindly stop talking to Mr. Brice, I think my labors would be facilitated. That's all right, Mr. Allen! And those other gentlemen at the back! Thank you. Well, I shall now outline roughly what we consider an equitable arrangement for all parties. First, there is a royalty of five per cent due, by special arrangement, to the government of Venezuela. Strictly speaking, President Castro is not entitled to a penny, as Cassaquari lies outside the Venezuelan frontiers, in a debatable territory claimed also by Brazil and Colombia. But the Venezuelans have shown us great consideration, and have afforded us, besides, the free and unhampered passage

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of our material. Second, the cost of the expedition must be charged against the capital account. That is an immense sum, not yet accurately defined, but it cannot be much under half a million dollars. Deducting these two items, we shall give twenty-five per cent of the residue to Mrs. Poulteney Hitchcock, twenty-five per cent to Dr. Von Zedtwitz, and apportion the remaining fifty per cent as follows: To myself, fifty shares; to Captain Jackson, fifteen shares; to the first officer, Mr. Haines, and Mr. Crawshaw, chief engineer, each five shares; to the second officer, Mr. Kirkpatrick, three shares; Mr. McCann and Dr. Phillips, each three shares; all petty officers one and a half shares; to every one else, one share. We shall give to the heirs of those who have died, or who may die, before the expiration of the expedition, one half of the share they would otherwise be credited with. Should any officer, or petty officer be disgraced, he will receive the share due to his lower rank. We shall add together the total of the shares, and with this number divide the general sum at our disposal. In the event of our safe return, I propose, before the accounts accurately be worked out, to advance from my private purse ten per cent of the amount approximately due to each man. In conclusion, let me say that I shall be happy to answer any questions."

"About them fellows in Felicidad?" piped up Johnny Tyrell. "What is there in it for them, mister?"

"Oh, they will share just as we do! Did I not make that plain? It surely would not be right to penalize them, and we don't propose to do so. Any other question?"

"May I speak?" said Beale.

"Why, certainly—go ahead."

"What's our protection that this arrangement is lived up to? A verbal agreement don't count for a row of pins."

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Speaking for the lower deck, I think it ought to be put on paper, hard and fast."

"I neglected to say that of course this will be done," said Westbrook, again rising to his feet. "Mr. McCann will take the matter in hand, and draw up the whole thing in the form of a contract. Copies of this, each one properly signed and witnessed, will be given to every individual on board. Nothing could be more businesslike than that, surely?"

There was a loud murmur of approval.

"Well, it depends how soon it is done," exclaimed Beale. "Mr. McCann has no watch to keep—why shouldn't he set to to-night?"

"That's unreasonable," replied Westbrook. "It will be done as soon as possible."

"Speaking for the lower deck," resumed Beale, "I——"

But Westbrook angrily cut him short.

"You're only speaking for yourself!" he cried. "I guess the men will take my word for it, and show a little patience. Am I not right, gentlemen?"

He was answered by a friendly roar that completely discomfited Beale.

"Anybody else?" inquired Westbrook.

"Only me," came a voice at the back.

"Well, speak up, only me!"

A little pale man elbowed his way to the front. He was an ex-jockey named Weaver, a silent, melancholy creature, who used to snuffle audibly at the evening sing-songs whenever there were allusions to home and foam, or the letter that never came, or such kindred tender subjects.

"There's one thing that's been overlooked 'ere," he said, in a high, squeaking voice. "We 'ave one person on board who ain't to get nothink, and I think it's a sin and a shame. It would be an everlasting reflection on our manhood if Miss

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Vera Westbrook was left out. I propose she share and share with us and have her pretty name down with the rest. What say, mate?"

It was carried by hearty acclamation.

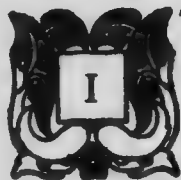
"In the capacity as mascot to the ship!" exclaimed Von Zedtwitz, his burly form shaking with merriment. "If the presence of a young and beautiful woman will not bring us luck, I know not (lacking the common sense) how we could do better. Come, my dear, and let us acknowledge to these good friends."

He went over to Vera, and of course his arm brought her to the head of the ship. She smiled bravely, and yet delighted and complimented, she stood beside the stalwart German, inclining her head to a storm of applause that greeted her.

And thus in harmony and good will the great meeting terminated.

"But we must keep an eye on that fellow Beale," said Westbrook.

CHAPTER XIX



It was a bleak prospect that met their eyes the next day. The gale had blown itself half out, but the weather sky was still dark and lowering, and over the prairie were expanses of dirty-yellow water that promised a hard going for the day. It was a scene of acute loneliness and desolation, depressing to spirits not yet recovered from the discomforts of the previous day. Everyone was tired and sore and disinclined for another jolting. But the wind was too good to lose, and the orders were to get away promptly at eight o'clock.

It was drawing toward this hour, and the after guard were all assembled on the after deck to view the start, when a seaman came aft and tipped his cap to Jackson.

"Stowaway on board, sir!" he said, grinning.

"Stowaway!" roared the captain. "What do you mean?"

"He's just come out of the hold, sir."

"Send him aft at once!"

There was a stir forward, and pretty well the whole crew advanced in a body, escorting in their midst the most woe-begone figure imaginable. It was St. Aubyn, dirty and disheveled, with his monocle forlornly stuck in his eye. But weak as he was he bore himself with bravado, and joined shamefacedly in the laughter that broke out at the sight of him.

"What's the meaning of this insubordination, sir?"

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"Oh, piffle!" returned St. Aubyn, with the most ingratiating impudence. "I wasn't going to be left behind, captain. I crawled in between some barrels and had a pretty nasty time, I can tell you! The filthy stuff ran out all over me and cases dropped on my head."

"And so we are to be burdened with a sick man?" exclaimed the captain. "You are in no state to stand all this, and you know it. A nice fix you've got us all into with your thoughtless selfishness!"

"Oh, don't be hard on me!" pleaded St. Aubyn. "I'm not going to be any trouble to anybody—and—and I feel better already."

His white, drawn face gave the lie to his assertion.

"And what if you die?" bellowed Jackson. "I ask you that, sir. I ask you that! And what if you die!"

"Oh, that's all right!" said St. Aubyn. "I'll take my chances. I don't want any fuss made over me even if I do. Throw me overboard and keep on."

The quiet sincerity of his speech made even the captain relent. Such pluck compelled admiration.

"All right, go forward. I'll send the doctor to you."

The poor fellow saluted and walked away.

The winches were both set in action, relieving the men of the hard labor of hoisting the sails. The reefs were shaken out, and the *Fortuna* was soon slowly moving under both fore-topsails and the foresail. Indeed, she acted so sluggishly that the mainsail was next hoisted, with a considerable improvement of her speed. But her wheels sank deeply into the miry ground, and she toiled and floundered along at a bare eight miles an hour. Later on, as the sun came out and the going hardened, she picked up a little, but this was in turn offset by the wind declining. But with less speed

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there was less motion, and the violent gyrations of the day before gave place to a lumbering unsteadiness that was easier on the nerves.

At six bells they hove to to take the sun, using an artificial horizon, and at noon another stop gave them their exact position. They had run a hundred and eighty-four miles, or, as the crow flies, more than half the way to Cassaquari—a wonderful performance, all things considered. But at four bells of the afternoon watch their fine progress was suddenly cut short. A shallow, dried-up watercourse caused them to haul their wind, and skirt it for several miles, looking for a passageway. At length, finding none they dared to attempt, and reluctant to put the *Fortuna* about after all this wasted distance, they squared away again, and stopped short at the likeliest looking place. Sail was taken in and preparations made to kedge across. This was a most tedious operation. As there were no rocks to make the kedge fast to, a pair of giant crowbars had to be driven into the ground to afford the necessary purchase. To these a wire cable was carried from the forward winch, and when all was ready, with men stationed at the brakes to guard the descent, the enormous hull worked forward foot by foot. In this manner the *Fortuna* was laboriously drawn across the declivity and piloted through the lumpy ground beyond—length by length—the crowbars driven in and dug out again eight separate times. Once she stuck hard and fast, mired up to the hubs of the after wheels, and was only extricated by doubling up on the other winch. For those not actively engaged in the task, it was most agreeable to escape from the confinement of the ship and stroll about, watching the strange spectacle. Mrs. Hitchcock flitted here and there with a camera, taking snapshots, and Vera, escorted by Dr. Von Zedtwitz and the paymaster—an animated little party of three—boldly walked on

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in advance, with something of the sensation of abandoning a steamer in midocean.

By half past four they were under sail again and on their course. With the extraordinary aptitude of human beings to adjust themselves to circumstances, they were beginning to feel at home on the *Fortuna*, and in some degree to make themselves comfortable. Fear had disappeared. Attempts were made to read, to play cards, to talk, to take naps. A concertina started up forward. Clothes were hung out to dry. Hildebrand, with his sleeves rolled up, was valiantly tackling a mountain of dough and filling innumerable little tin coffins with what was to become bread. Crawshaw, on orders from the captain, was getting the covers off the automatic guns and having them polished and oiled. Order was slowly emerging out of chaos. The routine of ship life was asserting itself. There was a noticeable cheerfulness. Everybody was "shaking down."

Late in the afternoon there was a rush to the side to watch a herd of antelope. They were at a considerable distance—a blurred, dark mass, tailing out to mere specks—and as their ways diverged the *Fortuna* soon lost them over the horizon. Later still, the lookout reported smoke to the southwest—a significant reminder that they were in a country of wild men as well as of wild animals. It was only a thin, faint spiral of blue, but it caused a great stir on the *Fortuna*. Rifles and cartridge belts were served out to the watch. The hoppers of the machine guns were filled with ammunition. Each officer received a revolver with instructions to carry it constantly, night and day, strapped to his waist. Extreme vigilance was enjoined, and at a council of war, held subsequently in the main cabin, a rough scheme was drawn up for fighting the ship, should the necessity unfortunately arise. Guns' crews were appointed, marksmen

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were told off to the fore and maintops, every man on board was to know exactly what he was to do, and where he was to go at the call to general quarters.

At this meeting something of a clash took place between Mr. Westbrook and Dr. Von Zedtwitz. The latter turned out to be a regular fire eater, and the memory of his three years' captivity made him merciless. Shoot to kill was his motto, and he derided, with clumsy sarcasm, Westbrook's plea for forbearance. But the inventor stood his ground, and insisted hotly that not a life should be taken unless in absolute self-defense. Kirk had never seen the old man so roused. The order to fire was only to be given at the last extremity. It would be to their everlasting disgrace, he declared with flashing eyes and shaking hands, to massacre these wretched savages on mere suspicion. After a heated debate in which the doctor, with the dreary monotony of another Cato, kept reiterating, "Mow dem down! Mow dem down!" it was finally decided to offer the enemy the Fontenoy privilege of the first shot.

"In that case their blood will be on their own heads," said Westbrook.

Afterwards, on deck, the German drew Kirk to one side.

"My dear poy," he said, "make not the mistake of underestimating these fine people Mr. Westbrook considers so highly. I have refrained with care from dwelling on their numbers and ferocity, lest our friends might have hesitated at blunging into such a hornet's nest. But if the pinch ever comes, remember—(and here he lowered his voice)—self-preservation is the first law. You have more to lose than any of us. Ach, I am not blind—there are other prizes than bars of gold—Kirpatrick, you listen to nothing, but open on them with everything you have. And I say this particularly to you, because——"

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The guttural voice sank still lower.

"Did you notice Jackson's face when we were talking there below?"

"Why, I——"

"Kirgpatrick, he's a coward."

Thursday, the third day out, found them becalmed. The gale had blown itself out, and there was every indication of settled and seasonable weather. The sky was blue and without a cloud; the air sweltering; the sun, as it slowly rose into the zenith, was as oppressive as a furnace. The morning passed without even the whisper of wind. Under rough awnings, fore and aft, the *Fortunas* lay or sat in lethargic discontent. It was intolerably hot; the horizon shimmered with heat; the metal deck blistered the feet and reflected the glare of the heavens above. The whole ship seemed to glow like an oven. Toward half past three a few cat's-paws rustled through the awnings. The *Fortuna* began to come to life. Then a light breeze sprang up, fitful and refreshing—the lightest of Trades. It gradually strengthened, encouraged to do so by the sibilant shi-i-i-i of the seafaring contingent. The ensign fluttered out bravely at the main as the captain mounted the bridge. The men eagerly sought their stations. The shattering grumble of the winches was heard, and the creaking of gear and blocks. Sail was made. Outer jib and flying jib were both set for the first time. The square sails were hoisted and braced. The great fore and aft sails filled and bellied. But all to no purpose. The *Fortuna* would not budge a foot. Staysails were run up, and the club maintopsail—but still she stuck.

It was Kirk who discovered the cause. He ran aft and found that one of the brakes was set. Hurriedly releasing it he had the satisfaction of feeling the ship begin to move.

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But it was at a snail's pace—a bare three miles an hour. In lumpy places it dwindled to even less. The *Fortuna* was a very poor sailer in light airs. She rolled along ponderously, threatening again and again to come to an absolute standstill. By easing the sheets and bearing up a point or two she was made to pick up somewhat, but the gain thus achieved was hardly counterbalanced by the loss of direction. She traveled faster, but added little to her southing. By sundown, when the wind sank, the dead reckoning showed she had made about seven miles—a pitiful advance when compared to the actual amount of ground covered.

Friday was better. The wind was fresher, and she was enabled to lie up closer to it. During the morning she averaged five knots, with occasional spurts of seven and eight. She was pressed to the utmost, and was given every stitch they could raise. The Trades were almost due east, and seldom veered more than half a point into the south. The helmsmen were told to steal every bit they could to windward, and as there was no leeway to contend with every yard counted. But it was anxious work, for she was very cranky, and had to be carefully nursed. She acted well in stays, however, and swung around smartly as the helm was put down. A good place had always to be chosen for this maneuver, for it would never have done to risk her in the hummocks. They were learning her ways now, and could forecast her behavior with some certainty. The labor of sailing her was consequently less harassing, though it was still arduous enough.

Saturday was remarkable for their first sight of the savages Dr. Von Zedtwitz feared so profoundly. At dawn the watch had been alarmed by the tramping of horses beneath the ship, and with a couple of pistol shots had dislodged a band of nine naked Indians, who had forthwith

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scampered out of range. But they halted within a mile of the *Fortuna*, and in fancied security boldly gazed at the monster who had invaded their fastnesses. They were mounted on scrubby little horses, and two of them carried rifles, which, however, they showed no inclination to use. Few though they were, there was something formidable in the sight of them. Their glistening bodies, their matted hair, their bows and arrows, their dark, sullen mien—all were disquieting. The doctor declared they were a patrol from a larger body, and urged the utmost circumspection. Indeed, if he had had his way, he would have turned one of the machine guns on the nine.

His conviction was borne out by their behavior. As the ship got under way they trailed after her persistently, refusing to be shaken off. Whether at a walk, a canter, or a gallop, they kept doggedly behind her, altering their pace and their direction to suit hers. At noon, when the wind died down, they made no attempt to come closer, but dismounted and huddled together on the ground. As the breeze sprang up again they resumed the pursuit, tirelessly following the *Fortuna* as she tacked across the prairie. Late in the afternoon, when the wind had again failed and the *Fortuna* lay becalmed for the night, they circled around her several times, and then galloping away to the southward finally disappeared over the horizon.

"Mark my words," said the doctor, "to-morrow there will be drouble!"

But his forebodings seemed unlikely to be borne out. The breaking day showed the vast expanse as lonely as the sea. From the crow's nest the searching glasses revealed not a sign of life—nothing but desolate immensity, rimmed by sky. By ten they were zigzagging to the south with a stiffish breeze, and logging a good nine. There was every

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prospect of a splendid run, and a general exhilaration animated the ship. She bowled along with a dip and a swing that made it impossible to keep one's feet without support; but little thought was taken of such discomfort, since it was always in proportion to the speed attained. The harder she was pressed, the bumpier and more violent was the motion. It was all the helmsmen could do to hold her on her course, and at times the backlash of the wheels flung them off their feet.

Five bells had hardly struck when Haines, who was conning the ship from the foretop, reported: "Horsemen on the port bow!"

This electrifying intelligence caused a great commotion. The men ran to quarters; the covers were stripped off the guns; rifles were served out from the charthouse. The captain sent aft for Westbrook, Mrs. Hitchcock, Dr. Von Zedwitz, and Kirk, and a hurried consultation was held on the bridge. The question was eagerly debated as to what they ought to do. It was decided to hold on, and ascertain the number of savages before going about. In the meanwhile, Haines kept the speaking tube busy.

"Raising them fast."

"They're separating into two bodies, as though to intercept us."

"Can't say how many—but there must be hundreds."

"They're opening out into a fan."

"Yes—rifles—lots of them. Can see them quite plainly."

Even from the bridge a dim, dark line was becoming visible in front. Then specks tumultuously moving like a herd of wild animals. Then unmistakable horses with naked riders walling the horizon.

Westbrook sent word to Vera to go below, and then coolly descended the ladder to take charge of the forward

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port gun. His last words to Jackson were, "Don't fire unless you have to."

The captain was looking very pale and helpless, and he only nodded in reply. Mrs. Hitchcock, with an old bonnet tilted on one side of her head, was almost dancing with excitement, and loudly pooh-poohed the notion of seeking safety. Von Zedtwitz, with a very grim air, was examining the sights of a rifle that had been handed up to him. He had a three years' account to settle with the Piapocos, and he wore a look of somber satisfaction. Kirk was holding to the weather rail, watching the swarming savages through his glass. He distrusted Jackson and distrusted Haines, and was silently considering the situation. The danger steadied him, and gave him an uplifting sense of responsibility. At any moment he might become answerable for the safety and lives of all on board. He could see the men looking up at him, as men always will when their leaders are to be tested, and he tried to bear himself with resolution and nonchalance.

The *Fortuna* was coming up hand over hand, as though to drive right through the wide array before her. There were at least eight hundred horsemen wheeling across her track, and on her port bow was another mob, compactly massed, and plunging on their wild ponies as though ready to dart on her flank. Cries, yells, and the pounding of hoofs vied with the clatter and bang of the enormous hull as she swept on with an earthshaking rush. Kirk felt his hair rising beneath his cap; he seemed to have forgotten how to breathe; it was frightful to think of plunging through all that flesh and blood. As in all moments of excessive tension, the eye took in some pictures with an extraordinary vividness—Westbrook, with his white hair all awry, crouching over his gun—the captain's face, withering with terror—a couple of

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men scrambling for cartridges that had spilled from a canvas bucket.

The savages scattered pell-mell to open a lane for the *Fortuna* to pass. The ship drove through a sea of rearing horses and naked, shrieking humanity—an avalanche of canvas and metal, bristling with death. There was a flit-flit of little arrows. Kirk, with wonder, saw some sticking in the mast. He pulled one out of his coat. He felt the whiz of others past his ears. The man beside him fell on his knees, and then rolled over twitching convulsively. But there was no time to think of him. On either hand the savages in hundreds were galloping beside the ship, and straining to keep pace with her. Patter, patter, patter, came the little arrows. Then shots, fewer, but more deadly, the fellows rising in their saddles and aiming with deliberation. Till then the *Fortuna* had made no reply, but now Westbrook's gun opened with an earsplitting crash. The others followed, belching flame. The deck shook with reverberations, and an acrid smell of powder filled the air. Fore and aft, every rifle was cracking furiously. It seemed as though nothing human could long withstand such a fusillade, and Kirk, looking back, saw their wake dotted with horses and men lying limp and bloody on the receding ground. But yet there was no sign of the pursuit being abandoned. The torn ranks filled up. The great horde clung on like wolves to either flank, and volleyed arrows and bullets with ferocity.

Jackson stood there as though he were made of stone. He did not answer when Kirk spoke to him. He did not even turn his head. He gazed straight before him into vacancy, and nothing could rouse him from a sort of paralysis of fear. Kirk snatched the speaking trumpet from his unresisting hand. The men were firing wildly, and, except for Westbrook's gun, and some of the sharpshooters like Von

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Zedtwitz and Bob St. Aubyn, a terrific amount of ammunition was being wasted.

"Starboard gun, ahoy! Starboard gun, there!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Lower, lower! Aim lower! Lower, I tell you!"

"What's the matter down there, Beale? Why aren't you firing? Port gun aft, why aren't you firing?"

A man came running up to say it was jammed.

"Then pass the word for Crawshaw. Get Crawshaw! Hold on!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Stop that jackass in the red shirt from shooting in the air."

"Very good, sir!"

It was hard to make the speaking trumpet heard above the din. There was a great deal of confusion—of purposeless running to and fro—of conflicting orders from those who had no right to give any. For a few minutes the ship was utterly out of hand. But Kirk rapidly brought back some degree of control. Above the pandemonium his resonant voice, magnified by the speaking trumpet, thundered forth his orders. He sent three men to the wheel to replace those that had fallen. He eased the sheets to try and outdistance the pursuit, and finding that of no avail, ran up the club topsail and a couple of other kites. He ordered the wounded and dying to be carried amidships, where the doctor could best serve them. He suppressed much random firing from those who did not know one end of a rifle from another, and whose crazy antics were a menace to every soul on board.

Crowded with every yard she could carry the *Fortuna* gradually forged ahead of the foam-flecked horses and their panting riders. The few that managed to keep her pace were



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shot down. The rest, straggling out for a mile, were little by little dropped behind. Then, altogether losing heart, they drew rein and sullenly watched their prey escape.

But Kirk's elation was shortlived. Amid the cheering and congratulations that celebrated their deliverance his face alone failed to reflect the universal joy. He knew they were soon bound to lose the wind, and even by squaring away to the westward, the best that could be hoped for was a run of a dozen miles. The battle would have to be begun again under circumstances a thousandfold more disadvantageous than before. Under sail the *Fortuna* was a formidable antagonist, but becalmed what was she but a rather rickety fort? The Indians had not been beaten. In spite of their losses they had hung on with desperation, and were as full of fight as ever. In a couple of hours the ship, stationary as a rock, would be again attacked. With no wind to move her she would have to bear a terrific onslaught with every point in the enemy's favor. Machine guns and all, she would be hard put to it, with less than fifty men, to withstand a horde of nigh a thousand. No, the wind was the biggest weapon they possessed, and the poorest use they could put it to was to fly.

"Stand by to go about!" shouted Kirk.

The cheering ceased. Men stared at him with open mouths, unable to believe that he could mean to renew the combat. Such apparent foolhardiness struck them dumb.

"All hands to your stations!"

His voice was so decisive that after an instant of hesitation there was a general movement to obey. The note of resolution and self-confidence was irresistible.

"Ready about!"

"Round in the weather braces. Flatten in the mainsheet there! Tend the jib sheets!"

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"Helms a-lee!"

The great hull swung round with a bump and a crash, and paid off on the other tack.

"Flatten in the head sheets. Lively, boys, lively! Belay the lee braces—haul taut the weather braces, trim in the main sheet!"

"All hands to quarters!"

The enemy was about half a mile distant, and it could be seen that this unexpected maneuver of the *Fortuna* had thrown them into confusion. A hoarse, low humming rose from their midst, and for a moment Kirk hoped that this was a signal for their flight. But on the contrary, they stood their ground, and opposed a defiant front to the oncoming ship. Kirk aimed her at the place where they seemed thickest, at the same time ordering his men to hold their fire till every shot could be made to tell.

Tense and breathless the gun crews stood ready to open with their hail of death. A file of men were passing up ammunition from below—the supply in the chart room beginning to run short. Here and there the sharpshooters, braced against the rigging, were covering living targets with their rifles. Such of the wounded as had the strength to do so were standing up, holding to what they could. One, too weak even for this, managed to roll himself to the scuppers, and was seeing what he could through a hawse hole. Lurching and plunging, her great wheels spinning like those of a locomotive, the *Fortuna* sped forward with ponderous velocity. The savages scattered to open a way for her as they had done before, but this time Kirk did not shrink from harming them. Within fifty feet of the lane he put up his helm, and sent the *Fortuna* crashing through a mob of men and horses. With her enormous headway she ground through them with unimpaired speed, jolting violently and

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reddening her wheels with blood. Even as she did so, the guns opened with murderous uproar, and from stem to stern every rifle was spitting flame.

But in the instant of her passage arrows flew thick and fast, and from a hundred guns or more repeated volleys swept over her deck. St. Aubyn fell, shot through the neck. A couple of men in the forerigging dropped like sacks of coal. One poor fellow ran screaming the length of the ship, holding his shattered jaw to his face.

With her guns detonating, her crew cheering, her cordage groaning and creaking, the *Fortuna* tore through the screeching, yelling throng and raced into the comparative security of the prairie beyond. Many still clung to her flanks like lapping dogs, but the main body, disorganized and appalled, made no attempt to follow, shrinking together in a panicstricken crowd. When Kirk again went about, and flung the *Fortuna* at their very center, they broke and fled. At first, even in flight, they kept some cohesion. But as the ship plowed through their frenzied ranks, her huge wheels striking down dozens at a time and crushing them into unrecognizable fragments of flesh, the survivors scattered in every direction like autumn leaves in the wind.

Thinking that the slaughter had gone far enough, Kirk gave the order to cease firing, and applied himself to breaking up the smaller parties, that in tens and twenties still kept together. Circling like some monstrous vulture, he in turn cut these off and scattered them to the four winds, till the savanna, as far as the eye could reach, was dotted with escaping figures. In these maneuvers he refrained as far as he could from taking more lives, being content to harass and terrorize the fugitives till he was satisfied they were utterly routed.

Then, setting the vessel once more on her course, he

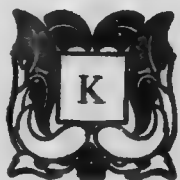
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thankfully drew away from such scenes of carnage, and let them sink behind him in the blue of the horizon. Unnerved and shaken by the terrible ordeal, it was with profound relief that he saw the battleground fade and disappear. Though they might now have counted themselves secure from molestation, and could have camped in security where they were, there was in every heart on board a consuming eagerness to escape to another air.

The captain, whose corpselike face had never moved a muscle throughout the action, and who had stood there as speechless and inert as a wooden figure, now slowly recovered his benumbed faculties.

"Kirkpatrick," he said, with pitiful bravado, in which there was a note of entreaty, "I think we may congratulate ourselves on the way we fought the ship!"

CHAPTER XX



IRK did not know, until he descended from the bridge to assure himself of Vera's safety and learn the extent of their losses, that in one brief hour he had become a hero. This fact, quite unsuspected on his part, was borne in on him by the tumultuous cheering that greeted his appearance. There was a rush to acclaim him, to shake his hands, to overwhelm him with vociferous admiration. Powder-blackened men, naked to the waist, with disheveled hair and splashed with blood and dirt, surged about him with mad enthusiasm. It was all he could do to force his way amidships, struggling in the most undignified manner with those who would have raised him on their shoulders and borne him aloft in triumph.

Tasting for the first time in his life the most intoxicating pleasure the world can give, his bewilderment was only equaled by his surprise. It had not dawned on him before that he had done anything so extraordinary, and he had even feared that his assumption of command might later on be resented. But here he was the hero of the ship, with great bearded fellows exalting him to the skies and huzzaing like so many lunatics. Amidships he was acclaimed with similar outbursts. Wounded men raised themselves to call out faintly: "Well done, Kirkpatrick! Good for you, old man!" Old Zeddy had one arm around him like a bear. Mrs. Hitchcock was covering his hand with kisses and crying hysterically. He was pushed and jostled and almost

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torn to pieces. As in a dream he looked for Vera. He was too human not to long that she was there to see him at this wonderful moment.

Ah! there she was, kneeling beside St. Aubyn, and gazing up at him with eyes like stars. Huddled about her on blankets and mattresses were the wounded men she had been tending, hemming her in so closely that she could not rise without disturbing them. But there was something in her glance Kirk thought he had never seen before—something that stirred him inexpressibly, and filled him with a sudden and wild delight.

But disturbing duties crowded on him fast and robbed him of those ecstatic moments. It was extraordinary how everyone deferred to him, and made him at once the arbiter of all their destinies. It was as though he had suddenly been elected king. His will was supreme, and authority was positively forced upon him. The poor, disgraced captain had hidden himself out of sight, and Haines had similarly disappeared. It seemed that the latter had lain throughout the battle on the floor of the top in a state of abject terror. The news had run round the ship, and he had been hooted and hissed as he made his appearance on deck. Fortune as usual had favored the brave, and in the time of stress the true leader had arisen. The cravenness of Jackson and Haines had been the means of exalting Kirk.

Their loss had been frightful, eleven killed and wounded out of a complement of fifty-six. Bence, Farquer, and McCann killed; St. Aubyn dying; Weaver, the little jockey, hanging between life and death, his only chance a difficult operation that would have to be carried out under the most trying and unfavorable circumstances; Johnson, Wickersham, Stubbs, Forsyth, Niedringhaus, and Stanley all more or less seriously hurt.

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It was hard to decide as to what was best to do. To expose these unfortunate men to the cruel buffeting of the ship was manifestly, for a while at least, impossible. The condition of St. Aubyn and Weaver absolutely precluded it. Yet time was precious, and the ship could not be tied up indefinitely. Westbrook and Zeddy were for going on at once at any hazard. They were sustained by the wishes of the injured men themselves, who, with magnificent courage, were unanimous in their desire not to hamper the expedition. Mrs. Hitchcock was in no state to take part in the discussion, and had locked herself in her cabin, sobbing and moaning on the floor.

Kirk was for temporizing, and with his new-found authority he had little difficulty in carrying his point. They were all tired out, he said, and neither cool nor collected enough to settle such a vital matter offhand. He wrung a reluctant consent from Von Zedtwitz and Westbrook that any decision should be postponed for twenty-four hours.

He himself was utterly exhausted by the strain of the battle. The reaction had left him as limp as a rag. In return for their concession he consented to seek his bunk and get a little repose. Not, however, until he had made the round of the ship, put her in trim to renew the fight, if need be, and stationed some of his trustiest men on guard. Even then, it was only at the most urgent insistence of his two friends that he allowed himself to be ordered below. But they promised that he should be called at the first sign of danger, and with this he had to be satisfied.

"See here, Kirkpatrick," said Westbrook bluntly, "you've shown us that you are the best man on board, and it's only common sense to take good care of you. Now shut up, and go below!"

Kirk obeyed. The old man's paternal tone touched him.

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Praise from Vera's father was praise indeed, however roughly it might be uttered. He threw himself on his bunk, and turning his face to the wall, fell fast asleep. He had been up the bigger part of the night before, and this had added to his fatigue. Body and brain were both weary, and he nestled his face to the pillow like a child to its mother's breast.

He had no idea how long he had slept when he felt his shoulder roughly shaken, and looked up to see his cabin crowded with men. He sprang up instantly in a sweat of apprehension, thinking that the *Fortuna* was again in danger.

"Good Heavens! what's the matter?"

"It's all right. Don't worry. We've come to have a talk with you."

It was Westbrook who spoke, and Kirk's alarm vanished as he regarded that grave, kind face. But his surprise rose by leaps and bounds at the unexpected sight of a dozen of the crew invading his room and peering in at him through the doorway. What did it mean?

"We've just come from a big meeting in the forecastle," said Westbrook. "These gentlemen are a committee who have been appointed to bring you the news."

"News?"

"You have been elected captain."

Kirk hardly knew what to say. He was still half asleep. The committee solemnly regarded him, while he drowsily regarded the committee. The silence was broken by Hildebrand.

"There's been the deuce to pay," he said.

Then the situation was gradually explained.

Mrs. Hitchcock, egged on by Jackson, had flatly announced her determination to throw up the expedition. The disasters of the day had completely cowed her, and she was

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frantic to turn back. She and Jackson had been among the crew, promising enormous sums of money to those that would side with her. Unfortunately, there were only too many who themselves had lost heart. The pair had secured at least sixteen adherents, and had it not been for the drastic action of Westbrook and the cooler heads, the conspiracy would have soon assumed dangerous proportions. As it was, it was bad enough, though the bolder spirits had rallied, and had defied the cowardly minority. Taking the bull by the horns, they had deposed Jackson and Haines, placed staunch men in charge of the arms, and had asserted their determination to proceed at any cost. But they were now confronted by three powerful enemies—Beale, Jackson, and the old lady's money. It was said that she had offered the Australian fifty thousand dollars and the command if he could head the ship back again to Felicidad, together with ten thousand to every recruit. This price put upon timidity threatened to undermine the resistance of those who otherwise would have remained firm. Why should they risk their skins for problematical treasures while safety and an assured competence could be so pleasantly combined?

Kirk inquired the names of his two other officers.

"Wicks and Goltz."

He could not have asked for better. Wicks was a middle-aged, merchant-service man holding a captain's papers. A bit of Devonshire granite, burly, slow of speech, with unflinching blue eyes—a fellow to be relied on to his last breath. Goltz was an ex-Uhlan, a bitter, brilliant, irascible creature, who in his palmy days had been a fop and *bon vivant*, and whose broken fortunes had left him nothing but a daredevil courage. He held his life cheap, and loved danger for its own sake.

Kirk buckled on his pistol and went on deck. It was

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nearly five o'clock, and the breeze still held. He regretted the necessity for losing the mileage they might so easily have made had it not been for the wounded. But this was in passing; there were more peremptory things to claim his attention. Grouping himself with his two officers on the bridge, he sent word for Beale. The Australian came swaggering aft, and mounted the ladder with a jaunty air.

"Hello, Kirk!" he said. "What's up?"

"Don't call me that again," exclaimed Kirk. "I'm the captain of this ship, and the sooner you know it the better."

Kirk's hand was on his revolver, and he looked so ready to use it that Beale's little ironical speech died stillborn at the first syllable.

"I haven't much to say to you, Beale," he went on, "except to tell you that if you don't toe the line I'll clap you in irons and keep you there. Do you understand? No tampering with the men, no dickering with Mrs. Hitchcock, no hole-and-corner politics. If I hear another word about turning back, I'll know who's at the root of it, and will give you short shrift. You can go forward."

Beale hesitated as though to argue the matter, but the row of resolute faces daunted him, and he turned on his heel without a word. It was no little victory for Kirk, and saved him from the disagreeable course of putting his threat into execution.

Then he sent for Jackson and Haines.

The latter appeared first. He was a sad-looking object; his features swollen up with weeping, and every line of his body articulate with dejection and shame. He acquiesced humbly in his disrating, and took his lecture in a snuffing silence. When he was told he had to shift his things forward, and take up his quarters in the forecabin, he broke down completely, and went away crying like a baby.

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"Well, where's Jackson?"

"Won't come, captain!"

"Won't come, eh? What did he say?"

The answer was unprintable.

"Take four hands with you and bring him."

"Ay, ay, sir."

Alas, for the fall of the mighty. Was this the erstwhile magnificent being who had lorded it in the high places—his coat ripped down his back, his face purple with passion, his shapely legs kicking and struggling like a recreant school-boy's in the grasp of the usher? A cursing, reviling maniac, fighting every inch of his enforced progress, bellowing, biting, scratching with superhuman fury. Dragged in front, boosted from behind, the late ornament of the transport service was ingloriously hoisted into view.

Kirk was alive to the fact that he owed his own promotion, in the first instance, to the liking Jackson had taken for him, and he was consequently desirous to be as easy with his former commander as he possibly could. Yet at the same time he had to assert, in no equivocal fashion, the power that had been invested in him. Swift and decisive action was needed to stem the incipient mutiny before it could gather greater headway. The ringleaders had to be taught, and taught promptly, that any attempt to turn back the ship would not be tolerated. Any paltering with the situation would assuredly result in disaster. As in every assembly of men, the mass were on the fence ready to side with the winner. It was a case of taking time by the forelock and striking hard.

Kirk made no effort to check Jackson's tirade. He patiently endured insults, threats, and vituperation that grew louder and more incoherent as the man's fury seemed to burst all bounds. Storming and raving he was fairly beside

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himself, frothing at the mouth, shaking his fist in the air, defying everything and everybody with a hoarse, spluttering torrent of invective that stopped at nothing. Kirk let him roar himself out, and when at last, spent and breathless, he paused from sheer exhaustion, he himself bore in.

"You've had your turn, Mr. Jackson," he said, "and now, I guess, it's mine. All this noise won't do you any good. I've stood it once, but I don't intend to stand it again. You've got to make up your mind either to take your medicine quietly, or, by George, I'll bundle you forward and keep you there. You're nothing now on this ship but a passenger—do you hear?—a passenger!"

Jackson was plainly working himself up for a fresh explosion.

"I—I—I—" he began in a choking voice.

"Silence!" thundered Kirk, advancing on him, and motioning to Goltz for the handcuffs.

The jingle of steel unmanned Jackson. He gazed wildly about him, and jerked his hands to his breast as though to save them from profanation. His bold front gave way to a cringing and pitiable submission.

"Hold on, boys," he pleaded in a broken voice. "For God's sake, don't put those things on me. I—I couldn't stand it. I'll try and do what you think best."

Kirk ordered Goltz back.

"Very well," he said. "We don't want to humiliate you if we can help it. If you will make it easy for us, we'll make it easy for you, and let bygones be bygones all round. Only remember this—you have more influence with Mrs. Hitchcock than any of us—that if I learn of any more bribes being offered to our men, I shall hold you personally responsible. That kind of thing has to stop. You must make it your duty to see that it does. We are determined to push

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the expedition through, and croakers and hangersback will get no mercy. Everybody went into this with their eyes open—and now that they're in, they'll have to stay in. That will do. You may go below."

"He's whipped," said Westbrook, as they watched the ex-captain descend the ladder with forlorn deliberation.

"Hope so," assented Kirk. "But the ship's full of loose powder, and a spark may set it off."

"Well, we have two of our firebrands in list slippers—Beale and Jackson."

"And the hose ready," added Wicks with a grin.

"If poor St. Aubyn goes it will have a very bad effect," said Kirk. "How is he?"

"Very low."

"And Weaver?"

"No better."

Kirk shuddered as his eyes swept the limitless expanse about them.

"What a place to leave your bones in!"

"Take care, my friend," said Westbrook, tapping him affectionately on the back. "If you lose heart, what shall become of us?"

"I'd give half my share to be under way again," exclaimed Kirk somberly. "This inaction is killing. We are going to be tied up here for days and days. Gentlemen, the coming weeks will prove a greater strain than our fight to-day, and it will test our courage a good deal more."

Dinner that night was the gloomiest of rites. No one could eat, and McCann's empty place stared at them like a specter. The worthy, jolly fellow, with his hackneyed jokes and unending prattle, was now still forever. In life he had been an amiable bore, full of puns and quips, and clumsy,

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good-humored chaff. It was hard to associate him with death, or to think that he lay stiff and stark with a sheet drawn over his livid face. Mrs. Hitchcock kept to her cabin, but Jackson took his accustomed seat, and in a crushed, stricken manner showed a sort of gratefulness at finding he was not to be sent to Coventry. They were all at some pains to ease his fall, and treat him with consideration and respect. Vera sat beside her father, but she was downcast and silent, and soon excused herself and slipped away. It was altogether a hushed, melancholy performance, and everyone was relieved when it was over.

Kirk made his rounds, ordered the searchlight lit, stationed a couple of men at each of the machine guns, and then, turning over the command to Wicks, buried himself in a dark corner to smoke a cigar. So many things had happened that he wished to draw on one side and think them over—wanted to have a talk with himself—alone and undisturbed. It was very hard for him to realize the topsyturvy changes of the last twelve hours—the battle, the deposition of Jackson and Haines, his own unexpected elevation, the unforeseen and alarming stand taken by the old lady to break up the expedition. Through all the random pictures thus counted up there persisted always a vivid, girlish face, with haunting eyes, and a look so troubled and strange that he trembled at his own presumption of its meaning. Did it not reflect something of his own heartsickness? Of his own wild longing?

Ah, this love that was supposed to be so sweet, it was the cruelest thing in the world!

Voices drew near him—two shadowy figures in close and confidential talk—Vera and the tall, thin, boyish doctor.

"It will be an hour before I dare to try—perhaps two.

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I can do nothing until he rallies a little. It's what's called a capital operation."

"But he has a strong constitution."

"That's almost a drawback, Miss Westbrook. A vitality lowered by long illness is preferable to that of a strong, hearty fellow struck down in the full tide of health and strength. The violent arrest is equivalent to wrecking an express train with its own brakes.

"You will call me when I'm wanted?"

"Oh, yes— That is, if you think you're brave enough to—to——"

"I'm not afraid, doctor. I'd despise myself if I allowed my squeamishness to stand in the poor fellow's way. I may faint afterwards, but until the operation is over you can rely on me."

"Miss Westbrook, you are a thoroughbred."

"No—just a woman."

"And shaming the men, as your sex always does. Those chaps mean well, but you can see yourself how stupid and useless they are. I'd rather have you in the sick bay than a dozen of them."

"Thank you, doctor."

"Get a little air, then come back. I want to put Weaver on the table and get out that arrowhead. I'm sure it's in there."

"Very well. I'll stay here till I'm wanted."

Phillips turned and left her standing there alone. Kirk called to her softly. She started, and then came toward him in the darkness. In an instant she was in his arms, her face burning under his kisses, her little, hot hands clinging to his. He pressed her to him in a fever of delight and exultation. She was his. He had snatched her from all the fates, and would never let her go again. He had no thought of her

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distress, her shame, her panting whispers to be released. He kissed her until she forgot everything in an ecstasy of love, till her lips were as eager as his, till in that resistless torrent of emotion she was swept headlong, powerless to save herself. He told her that he loved her. Oh, how he loved her! He had loved her from the first day—loved and hated her—both. Hated her for her beauty that had tortured him without ceasing. But she was his now. He extorted the admission from her. He put the most endearing words into her mouth, and crushed her until she repeated them—repeated them again and again, with tender, mocking variations. The primitive woman in her wanted to be coerced, to flutter in the bonds of an irresistible strength, to rouse to frenzy that most savage of all egoisms. To submit was rapture—to believe that one had no choice—to feel a delicious helplessness, and swoon in an iron grasp.

“Kirk, darling?”

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“You would do anything for me, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course, I would.”

“Even if it were very disagreeable?”

“What do you mean, Vera? I don’t understand.”

“Kirk, Captain Jackson is right!”

“Right!”

“It’s crazy for us to go on. Oh, don’t hate me for saying it! But, Kirk, please, for my sake. No, you must listen—you must, you must. It is too dangerous and terrible to go on. Think of all those poor fellows lying there. Nothing is worth such a price—no, not all the treasure in the world! It was all very well before. It was delightful then. It was inspiring and splendid. But now it would be wicked—

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criminal, Kirk. If it were in a better cause 'd say nothing. But what is it all for—just money."

"But that's everything."

"No, it isn't!"

"It is to me. Otherwise it would mean losing you. I must have it."

"Oh, Kirk, papa is worth ever so much! He will take care of us."

"Oh, that's impossible. You would not have me a dependent."

"I thought you wanted me so much."

"But a beggar?"

"But he'll make you something—find you something to do."

"Besides, Vera, I couldn't be so disioyal. It's more even than the money—lots more. I'd be a cur to back out now. What could be more treacherous, more ignominious! As long as your father and Von Zedtwitz wish to go on, don't you see I have no other course?"

"But talk it over with them. Explain it to them. I know they will listen to you. Papa defers all the time to your judgment. You are the one person he would yield to."

"I simply couldn't."

"Oh, Kirk, you could—you could!"

"Besides, we are more than halfway there, much more than halfway. It would be cowardly to turn tail now."

"And if we meet more savages?"

"Fight them."

"And if I were hurt? Suppose I had to have my foot cut off like poor Stanley?"

"Next time I'll see that you're out of harm's way. We're going to armor one of the cabins for you and Mrs.

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Hitchcock, and make certain that you both stay there. It was frightful how you exposed yourself to-day."

"And if the ship were carried? You know the horrors that a woman is exposed to? I should have thought that that might have weighed with you. Think of my——"

"Stop—Vera, stop! I—I——"

"Is it not true?"

"No, I'd kill you first."

"And if you were dead?"

"They've learned their lesson. They won't touch us again. Zedtwitz is positive of it."

"He'd be positive of anything—to go on."

"No, no."

"It's my first favor. The only thing I've ever asked of you—and you refuse it."

"I have to. Good Heavens, I have no choice!"

"Even after all I've said?"

"Oh, my darling, try and put yourself in my place! The disgrace of it—the disloyalty! The decision must rest absolutely with your father."

"Nothing can shake him. He's incredibly obstinate. His whole heart's bound up with this wretched ship and his childish pride in it. You're just the same. I count for nothing with either of you."

"That isn't true. It's a question of honor."

"And what of love? Is that not more?"

"Don't put it like that!"

"But I do."

"Then I'm helpless."

"Yes or no, Kirk?"

"Oh, you know I can't!"

"So that's the test of your love for me? Well, I shall plead no longer. I have some pride, too, and you have

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trampled it under foot. It's a bitter thing to find that you have given your heart to a man who is unworthy of it. No, no, don't—that's all over!"

She gently freed herself, and left him before he could realize the full significance of their quarrel. Then he followed her, begging incoherently for her forgiveness.

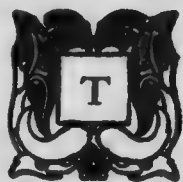
"There's nothing to forgive," she said in a sad little voice. "You've disappointed me—that's all. I—I thought you cared, Kirk."

"But I do, I do!"

"I don't wish to talk about it any more. It's too heart-breaking. But if to-morrow you don't change your mind, I'll never speak to you again."

With that she was gone.

CHAPTER XXI



THE next day at dawn the mournful preparations had to be made to inter the dead. St. Aubyn had passed away during the night, and four graves had to be dug a little way from the ship. All hands were assembled to pay the last honors to their fallen comrades, and the four bodies, sewed in hammocks, were reverently borne to their last rest. The flag was half-masted, and from the *Fortuna's* lofty deck, and grouped about her guns, the little handful of the guard looked down at the slow procession wending its way across the prairie. Westbrook read the burial service, and to none of his hearers had it ever sounded more beautiful or impressive. The vastness and desolation of the scene, the rugged figures of the men leaning on their rifles, the stately measure of the words—all conjured up a picture that could never be forgotten.

It was not a sight to strengthen hearts already faint, and on their return a council of war was held in the chart room to discuss the very serious situation that now confronted them. Phillips, previously the least considered of the party—a gawky, boyish, diffident fellow, fresh from the medical schools of Edinburgh—had now become a powerful factor in their plans. He was listened to with respect, and his proposals were attentively considered.

He expatiated on the harm to their *morale* that would result from their remaining where they were. The constant sight of those graves, he said, would have a depressing effect

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on everyone on board, and sickness would indubitably follow. He was for putting in another day's sail, and then forming a comfortable camp beside the ship where the wounded might have the necessary space so lacking on the *Fortuna* itself, and at least two weeks for recuperation. The one difficulty in the way was Weaver's extremely precarious condition.

"I cannot assume the responsibility single-handed of moving him," went on the young doctor. "Even a few hours of jolting and racking might cost him his life. But it seems to me that this is a case of considering the greater good of the greater number."

"When do you think he would be in a state to safely endure it?" It was Westbrook who asked.

"Gentlemen, not under two months."

This was a thunderclap.

The question of a temporary camp a few miles to the southward was lost in the greater one of perhaps condemning an unfortunate man to death. Besides, the two months would trespass seriously on their reserves of provisions and water, not to speak of bringing them perilously near the wet season when the flooded savanna would turn to bog.

"It is a peety," said Von Zedtwitz. "Weaver was a fine man, but——"

His pause spoke volumes.

"And the others, doctor?"

"Oh, I'll have them fit to travel in a fortnight!"

Weaver was indeed a dilemma.

"And he may die after all?" said Crawshaw.

"Oh, certainly," assented Phillips. "He has hardly three chances in ten."

There followed a prolonged discussion that brought mat-

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ters no nearer a climax. Kirk, who had held back and said little, was the first to resolve their perplexities.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it seems to me not a matter for us, but for the poor fellow himself. Let it be laid before him quite frankly, we pledging ourselves to abide by his wishes. We will stay here, or go on, or go back to Felicidad, just as he desires. This is the only way to evade a responsibility that I, for one, will not take on my shoulders."

"The captain's right," put in Wicks.

"Is he in any condition to consider it?" inquired Goltz.

"Oh, he is conscious," said the doctor. "This morning he dictated a letter to his mother."

"Then in that case I think we are unanimous," exclaimed Westbrook. "Has anyone an objection?"

His question, though including them all, was more particularly addressed to Von Zedtwitz. The German was tugging at his whiskers in a sullen, fidgety manner. The plan did not suit him at all. To put the expedition in jeopardy for the sake of one man irritated him profoundly. It struck him as a bit of silly sentimentalism. This made his answer all the more unexpected.

"I bow to the majority," he said grimly.

Phillips was sent away to submit the matter to Weaver. A little later he returned.

"You're not to consider him at all!" he cried. "By George, I take my hat off to that fellow! If that isn't pluck for you, I'll eat my hat!"

"He consents to go on?" inquired Westbrook.

"Insists on it. I had to tell him the risk. 'Hang the risk,' he said, 'a man can only die once—only keep me alive as long as you can, doctor, and when my time's come, let me go easy!'"

There were exclamations of approval, of admiration.

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The dilemma no longer existed. Weaver had freed them from a terrible responsibility.

"After all, it's only what any of us would have done," said Crawshaw simply.

By ten o'clock the *Fortuna* was under way again, lying up closehauled against a stiff breeze. Cots had been slung for the wounded, alleviating in some slight measure the trying motion of the ship. The hatches were off the main hold, and tents and other paraphernalia were being hoisted out in readiness for the camp. All was bustle and animation, and it was apparent that the men's spirits rose with every mile which separated them from those four lonely mounds behind them. Kirk alone betrayed none of the buoyancy that was everywhere so manifest. He was in a bitter and dejected humor. Vera had been true to her word, and had cut him to the quick by her coldness and disdain. He had tried to reinstate himself, hoping that on second thoughts she would show some relenting. But she had listened to him in silence, and then had turned away. He was no match for her in such a contest. He could not affect a similar attitude. His face could not hide how cruelly he had been hurt. For him it was the end of the world, the end of everything, and he went about his duties with a benumbing sense of despair.

But there was too much on his shoulders to allow him for long to dwell on his misery. Orders had to be given, a hundred things seen to, and the ship vigilantly watched to coax every yard out of her. He pressed her as hard as he dared, finding a certain pleasure in scaring his command out of their seven wits. Never before had the *Fortuna* been so audaciously handled. Again and again her weather wheels lifted, and the whole enormous fabric careened over with a

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sickening lurch that brought the heart to the mouth. With every stitch drawing, a mountain of humming, belying, straining yellow silk, he kept her racing at a breakneck pace, with a rush and thunder in consonance with his own harsh thoughts. He had learned every trick of her now. He knew to a hair what she could stand. He could feel and trust her like his own body. But to the others, who had no such assurance, it was as though they had given themselves over to a madman.

Toward noon the declining wind left them becalmed. There was the usual long, sultry interval, to be borne with what patience they might. The good news was passed around the ship that Weaver was better—positively better. He had suddenly become a very important personage, and the desperate fight he was making to keep death at bay, as well as the courage and good humor with which he bore his frightful sufferings, stirred his companions with a limitless compassion. The new camp was to be named Weaver—Camp Weaver—and the poor, stricken, little derived much satisfaction from the honor.

"How good you boys are!" he whispered. "Camp Weaver! I say, that's the sort of thing to make a chap feel proud!"

Mrs. Hitchcock appeared at table that day for the first time since Jackson's deposition. She was very subdued, though there was a gleam in her sunken black eyes that betokened mischief. But she was civil to everybody, inquired the day's run, and comported herself with a sort of stiff dignity that became her very well. Westbrook thought to patch up peace with her, and mistook her carefully calculated manner as an overture of friendship. But he was quickly undeceived.

"You fail to appreciate my position," she said coolly.

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"You have everything your own way just now, and I am powerless. But I'll find a means to assert my rights long before you ever reach Cassaquiari."

"My dear Mrs. Hitchcock," cried Westbrook, "it is most painful to hear you speak like that! May I not appeal to your good sense, your generosity, to set at rest this miserable misunderstanding? This is a time for us all to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, and drop all our differences for the common good."

He rose, and came over to her, holding out his hand.

"For Heaven's sake, let us be friends!" he exclaimed.

Her sallow face hardened, and two little spots of red showed in her cheeks.

"We are not friends," she said, "and we never can be again. This vessel is my property; the food you are eating was bought with my money; I have the legal right to demand our return to Felicidad. You choose to defy me—well, I will make no threats, but I warn you I am submitting to compulsion, and will seize the first opportunity to turn the tables on you."

Westbrook went back to his place and sat down again.

It was an unfortunate moment for Jackson to remark that he himself intended to sue him for a quarter of a million damages. "For abduction," he said, "not to speak of barratry, piracy, and wrongful dismissal."

At this Westbrook's temper leaped all bounds.

"Then sue away!" he roared. "Sue, sue, sue! And I'll show you up in court for the coward you are! Yesterday we took your measure, Jackson, and if you ever say sue again, or as much as raise your little finger against us, we'll give you the swiftest trial a man ever got, and a frog-march forward! Sue, indeed! By Heavens, we'll give you something to sue for——!"

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Jackson bent his head before the storm—his cheeks, his ears, the back of his head slowly turned to crimson. Mrs. Hitchcock took up the challenge he dared not accept, and trembling with passion, let fly the lash of her tongue.

The party broke up in disorder. The old woman's onslaught could only be evaded by flight. There ensued a general *saute qui peut*, her strident voice pursuing them as they hurried up the companion. All compromises had become impossible. It was to be war—war to the knife.

Later in the day the wind sprang up as brisk as before. Sail was again made, and the *Fortuna* resumed her course. It seemed too bad, when the weather conditions were so favorable, that they should be condemned to a tedious period of inaction. By sundown the dead reckoning showed them to be within a hundred and ten miles of Cassaquari, or hardly more than three days distant. But there was no help for it, and the only thing to do was to be philosophical and patient.

The camp was begun at once beside the ship, and though it was not completed before dark, a comfortable shelter was raised for the wounded, and the men lowered under the supervision of the doctor. There was some disagreement as to whether the camp should be fortified or not. One idea was to intrench it, and dismount the machine guns from the *Fortuna*. But after much consideration it was decided that the mobility of the ship was too precious to lose, and that in case of emergency it would be wiser to get on board of her and repeat, if they could, the tactics of the previous battle. Under sail she was a terrible antagonist, and offered them, besides, the advantage of flight. Even standing she was a better fort than any they could build, and afforded them an incomparably securer refuge.

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A strict routine was outlined, and the petty officers, after being assembled, were cautioned to use the greatest vigilance, and see to it that discipline was not slackened. In idleness there is always a disintegrating leaven to contend with, and a considerable body of men is more apt to suffer from doing nothing than from doubled tasks. Little injustices assume the proportions of mountains, grumblers get together and contaminate the rest. The food, the commonest cause of all discontent, becomes the subject of furious criticism. Satan, if he does not actually find mischief for idle hands, suggests that the coffee is dishwater, that the flour is musty, that an infamous cook is victimizing them with rotten stores while the after guard is fattening with every luxury. Kirk was so well aware of this that he proposed that they should all fare and fare alike, fore and aft, and evenly divide such little delicacies as jam and butter and canned fruit. A rigorous and impartial allowance, without favoritism to any but the sick, would go far to keep the malcontents in order.

They all foresaw—Westbrook, Von Zedtwitz, Crawshaw, Wicks, Goltz, and Kirk himself—that Camp Weaver was likely to become a hotbed of treachery and disloyalty. With every safeguard it would be impossible to prevent Jackson and Mrs. Hitchcock from carrying on a propaganda for retreat. With the dazzling inducements the latter could offer—so tangible and sure in comparison to a treasure that was conceivably a myth—this period of delay was fraught with extreme danger. To many of these needy adventurers a sum of five or ten thousand dollars was a veritable fortune in itself, and the bait was likely to be greedily taken. The situation had to be faced with all the coolness and resolution they could muster, and it was determined to keep a close watch on the pair, and nip anything in the nature of a conspiracy in the bud. Beale especially was to be under surveillance, though

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Wicks told them that the fellow had lost much of his authority among the crew, and that they were overrating his capacity for evil.

For Kirk the trying and deadly monotony of the days that followed had the added bitterness of his estrangement from Vera. He had apparently affronted her too deeply for forgiveness. She steadfastly refused his advances, kept all she could out of his way, and did not even pay him the compliment of betraying either anger or chagrin. In public—and he never saw her at any other time—her manner toward him was undistinguishable from that she showed the others. She did not pointedly avoid him, she addressed him just enough to give the rest no chance for remark or conjecture, and yet her girlish armor was impenetrable.

Kirk grew moody and silent, and kept much to himself. He dreaded the moments that brought them together, and was always the first to slip away. He had no similar armor—no means of hiding his dejection—and he shrank from those enforced meetings that brought home to him the realization of all that he had lost. The days, once so short, seemed now never to end, and he would pace for hours before his tent, up and down, up and down, in a blank pre-occupation. Time, for that matter, hung heavily on everyone. This little handful of human beings was hemmed in by the confines of their camp as though it were a rock in the sea. No one was permitted to pass the lines, and in that illimitable solitude they actually suffered from confinement.

This stern rule was found necessary by the frequent sight of Indians. Once a party of twenty galloped boldly round the camp, and were only driven off by a shot fired over their heads. The lookout constantly reported the presence of the enemy on the horizon, and more than once all hands were called to arms. At night the great searchlight moved rest-

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lessly in its orbit, flooding in turn, with a startling brilliancy, every segment of a vast circle. No precaution was omitted to guard the camp, and at regular intervals Kirk made the rounds to see that every sentinel was in his place.

The irksomeness of it all was intensified by the lack of improvement in Weaver. His condition remained unchanged. While the others grew daily better, he hovered between life and death, and gave no promise of ever releasing them from their predicament. The doctor said he might linger on for months, and only shook his head when questioned as to his ultimate recovery. The uncertainty told on everyone's spirits. It seemed as though they were stuck there forever. The nervous tension showed itself in many disagreeable ways—growling, fault-finding, quarrels, and fights. Kirk's authority was taxed to the utmost, and he found it increasingly difficult to preserve order. He had to overlook many little derelictions, and exert all his tact to keep down turbulence and broils. Discipline slowly crumbled, and grievances multiplied. To add to the general exasperation the weather was perfect, and twice a day they were tantalized by a gusty Trade that under happier circumstances might have so fleetly carried them on.

One afternoon there was a heavy squall of rain. Kirk took advantage of it to fill his water tanks, which were already seriously depleted. He had put all hands on a rigid half allowance, and this alleviation was most welcome. The squabbling and heartburning over water came near to assuming the proportions of a mutiny. The niggardly pint that had been allowed for ablutions he had had to cut in half. His economy had been bitterly criticised, for of all hardships that of being dirty is the worst. The rain was a Godsend, relieving him as it did from those restrictions he had deemed it imperative to impose. Incidentally the squall drowned out

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the camp, blew down several tents—including his own—and incited everyone to laundry work. There was a scramble for soap, for buckets, pans, basins. Big fellows, stripped to the waist, floundered in soapsuds, rubbing and scrubbing under the downpour with the glee of children. It was the first washday in Camp Weaver—and the fact that it was possibly the last as well drove everyone into the open with his arms full.

As soon as the sun came out, Kirk had the winches going on board the *Fortuna*, and all her sails hoisted. He was afraid of their mildewing on the booms and yards, and wished to dry them thoroughly. Every sailor knows what havoc damp plays on board a ship, especially in the tropics, and how dearly neglect is punished. It cost Kirk a pang to hear the slatting of the booms, and watch the straining, uneasy sails as though the old ship herself was fretting to be off. He was fretting, too, and it seemed more unendurable than ever to be doomed to remain there, anchored to a lying man, while the precious wind was blowing itself to waste, together with all their hopes and plans.

He sighed, and went back to his tent, where it lay collapsed in a good-sized puddle. He got it up anew, pinned his soaking and bedraggled wardrobe to the guy ropes, and wondered if the world would ever be dry again. The air of comfortlessness everywhere, the yellow mud, the cigar that would not keep alight, his slopping feet, the disagreeable sensation of water trickling down his back—all were depressing to the spirit, and hard to bear with equanimity. He returned to the *Fortuna*, and swinging himself up the spidery spokes of her front wheels, ensconced himself on the truck. This was a favorite place of his. For an undisturbed nap it had no equal. Here he had dreamed away many a hot hour, snugly hidden out of sight. It was cool, silent, and

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peaceful, though a trifle hard to lie on. On this occasion it had the added advantage of being dry.

He took off his shoes and socks, unloosened his belt, and bundling up his coat into a pillow, fell into a doze. The camp, with all its cares and discords melted away. Basalt islands rose out of the mist, rimmed with palms, and set in a pellucid sea. His boat was grating on the shingle, and the natives were coming down to welcome him. What a pity they had brought all those pigs. He appreciated the compliment, of course—but what should he do with them? Dozens of pigs, borne on poles, and screaming only as pigs can. He could not hear a word that Peau was saying—nothing but pig, pig, pig. Then the boat began to rock. The fools were letting it slip back into the swell. If they weren't careful the next comber would roll them over!

He opened his eyes. Pigs, no—but men, distractedly shouting and yelling. Through the rapidly revolving spokes of the wheels he saw Wicks with a rifle at his shoulder, deliberately aiming at the ship. With this one exception the whole camp seemed to be in pursuit as they might after a runaway, straggling out for a couple of hundred yards in breathless and panicstricken confusion. For a moment Kirk thought the *Fortuna* had broken away of herself, but he was quickly undeceived by the explosion of Wicks's rifle—the threatening gestures of the pursuers—the cries, the execrations—more than all by the hoarse rattle of the steering chains as he watched them tauten and slacken in obedience to the helm above.

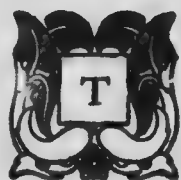
Then it was no unlucky accident? A directing brain was guiding the mighty fabric, and he could feel her speed quicken as the sheets were paid out and she was put dead before the wind. Doubled up on the journals, and holding on with a convulsive clutch, Kirk slowly began to recover possession

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of his faculties. Ah, he understood now those sly glances—Beale's unexpected willingness and good humor in getting the gaskets off—the readiness of some other of the malcontents to bear a hand for the common good while better men held back, intent on rescuing their sodden belongings. It was as plain as daylight now.

Jackson and Beale had run away with the ship!

CHAPTER XXII



HE pursuing figures dwindled. The camp shrank to a few melancholy bits of white silhouetted far behind on the edge of the sky. The *Fortuna* was held on an undeviating course to the westward, her booms guyed out, her towering sails singing as she plunged and rocked before the wind. There is something extraordinarily disconcerting in the treachery of one's mechanical slaves—to be guillotined by one's own guillotine—to be shot by one's own pistol. It was almost incredible to Kirk that their good old ship, so long their home, which had borne them so bravely and so well into these untrodden wilds, could now be used so effectively against them.

At first he was convinced that the vessel would soon heave to. The miscreants could impose their own terms, and he never doubted but what there would be a parley—and a surrender. Though consumed with anger, he had to admit that Jackson had the whip hand of them, and he tried to bring himself to the mortification of submission. It would be a hard pill to swallow, but what else was there for them. The possession of the ship, the guns, the stores, and water precluded any argument. The only alternative was to perish miserably like castaway sailors on a raft.

No, Jackson had it all his own way, and the best that could be made of defeat was to accept it gracefully. But he ground his teeth all the same, and in his heart cherished a

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wild plan of retribution, even if it had to be put by till they reached Felicidad.

But there was no sign of shortening sail. The camp had faded from view and still the ship was kept at a terrific pace. The situation began to assume a more ominous and sinister aspect. Was there to be no parley then? Were these fellows above coldbloodedly deserting the party behind? It looked more and more like it. Revenge had to give way to the more practical consideration of what he was to do. Do! What could he do? He had his sixshooter, but much good it was to him, crouched there on the journals and holding on like a buckjumper. Should he drop, and take his chances of rejoining the camp? Risky and worse still—profitless. Should he wait till night, and then, in some way, disable the vessel? Excellent—if he but knew how. But how? He racked his head for ways. Almost any harm within his power to inflict could be readily repaired. It would take a stick of dynamite to do anything irreparable—but he had no dynamite. He knew there was some in the hold, but what likelihood had he of finding it? None.

The machine guns? It would be easy to put them out of commission. Easy, too, to get at the rockets and blue lights in the chart room and signal the position of the ship to the desperate men behind. But the distance was prohibitive. She was making all of eight knots, and it would be a long time yet before the wind would die down. They would make twenty miles, if a yard—and maybe thirty. The futility of signaling was apparent, even if he sneaked in the crow's nest and lashed a couple of lanterns, the one above the other—even if he helped them out with rockets and blue lights. He might be safe enough till morning, but they'd shoot the lanterns to flinders. It was impossible, hopeless, crazy.

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There loomed up before him a much less glorious rôle. To boldly come out at sundown and appeal to the men's humanity. None of them was really bad. At least, he would have said so the day before. Beale himself was not at all one's idea of an absolutely heartless brute. He was blatant and vindictive, and swollen with ideas of his own importance—but it was impossible to believe he would not listen to reason. No sane man would care to blacken his soul with so terrible a crime. As he studied the matter from this side Kirk realized how grossly he had exaggerated his fear, and the more he was relieved the angrier he grew at such triumphant treachery. It was on the cards that the mutineers would themselves signal—blue lights and all—to take the heart out of the majority by exposing them to a frightful tramp across twenty miles of prairie. Kirk's blood boiled at the thought of it. Not if he could help it, by George. He would gladly have given his life to circumvent such deliberate villainy, which, as he considered it, grew more and more probable. The poor wretches, ready to drop with exhaustion and thirst, would be gathered in by twos and threes, without even the strength to reproach the scoundrels who had inflicted this suffering upon them. The picture of Vera on this all-night march roused Kirk to desperation.

He was a powerful man, in the prime of vigor and health. Better still, he had a revolver with six forty-four cartridges. Surely he could do something—surely—surely! Such deviltry ought not to be permitted to go unpunished. By Heavens, he would find a way! He had to. He must.

He crept out on one of the axles, warily, holding tight, watching the play of those terrible spiral springs through which he had to pass. They would crush together as the vessel dipped, and then rebound again with disconcerting sudden-

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ness. To be caught here was to have one's body ground to pulp—it was a mouth, with snapping fangs of steel, holding one at bay with unutterable horrors. The motion of the vessel was so irregular and violent that it was impossible to forecast it. Kirk nerved himself for the ordeal, and waiting for the moment of rebound dragged himself through with feverish agility. The fangs closed behind him with a discordant grating and creaking that made him shudder. But he was safe. His head swam, he saw a dizzy world through the whirl of wheels, the flesh seemed to cringe on his bones—but he was safe.

He crawled out till he could see the channels above him, and the black, impending rigging where it was made fast below. He undid his holster, placed his pistol in his trousers' pocket, and, with the grim resolve to shoot first, pulled himself up the shrouds. Here he rested to get his breath, to toss away his cap, to draw out his revolver and cock it. Then with stealthy deliberation, foot by foot, he mounted till his eyes were on a level with the deck.

At the steering wheels were four men clinging to the spokes, and swaying with every movement of the ship—Beale, Harding, Gibbs, and Mackay—so near that he could see the whites of their eyes. The big Australian had a pipe in his mouth, and his bare, sinewy arms, tattooed in a dozen places, sprawled over his wheel as though, as usual, he was letting the others do all the work. Forward on the bridge Kirk could make out some figures, one of them a woman. From the crow's nest protruded two tiny heads. As far as he could gather this completed the complement of the mutineers. The galley was shut, the 'ong deck apparently empty, and the fight seemed to resolve itself into one against four. If he could manage to land the first shot the rest would be child's play.

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He scrambled over the rail, and even as he did so, Beale saw him, and with a yell whipped out a revolver from his hip pocket, and fired at him point blank. Kirk was so unprepared for the fellow's quickness that three shots whistled by his head before he could reply. He had never been in a pistol duel before, and to make a target of a man was a paralyzing sensation. His weapon seemed to go off of itself. The explosion was terrific. There was a flash of flame, and agonized faces seen through the smoke. It went off again and again—bang, bang, bang, like a cannon. Where was Beale? Was that he lying on the deck, face down, kicking? Shamming, maybe. Well, here was one more. The bead of the pistol danced over the huddled mass. The flame leaped again. Was there another cartridge left? He couldn't remember. Oh, he wished to Heaven he could remember! Why weren't the other fellows shooting? Their hands were all on the spokes. They did not dare to let go—they couldn't—without Beale to help them the backlash was almost unmasterable, and they were repeatedly lifted off their feet. The vessel was yawing, and the wind was spilling out of the mainsail. Kirk had a vision of Haines on the weather end of the bridge, leveling a rifle at him. It was now or never. He would be killed like a dog. His voice was uncontrollable. It was all he could do to speak, and then it sounded strange and cracked.

"Down with your helm!"

The men gaped at him in consternation. He flourished his revolver at their quailing faces. Haines began pumping viciously with the rifle. Bullets were spattering everywhere.

"Down with your helm. Down! *Down!*"

The spokes were shot to starboard. The main boom jibed, snapping the guy ropes like pack thread. Kirk lowered his revolver, and running aft, bent his own strength

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to putting the helm hard down—hard down as far as it would go. The *Fortuna* turned in her own length, and with a crash like the end of the world rolled completely over.

When Kirk came to himself he was lying in a tangle of gear. He felt sleepy and cold, and the full extent of the disaster only dawned on him by degrees. There was a dull, grinding pain in his right shoulder, and the arm itself was numb. He put his left hand to his head, and drew it away all wet with blood. He regarded it stupidly, and then in the same bewildered way pinched his legs to see whether they had suffered. No, his legs seemed all right. He twiddled his toes, and was gratified to find that they could do it. He felt himself all over, prepared for horrifying surprises, and finding none returned to the consideration of his arm. It seemed to be broken. It was as lifeless as a piece of wood. He pulled up his sleeve and touched the flesh gingerly. It had a livid look he did not like, and ugly, crimson streaks. Felt his head again, and came to the conclusion that it wasn't much hurt, though his hair was matted with blood, and there was a persistent warm trickle down one ear.

He extricated himself and staggered to his feet. The wreck about him was frightful. The deck of the *Fortuna* rose before him, sheer as a wall. He was standing in a chaos of sails, ropes, splintered booms and yards, crates, barrels—from which he heard groans and faint cries for help. Crushed under the main boom he perceived the figure of a man. He went over to it. It was Beale—or what had once been Beale—for the body was mangled out of all recognition save for one tattooed arm. Farther on he pulled a lot of stuff off Haines and helped him up. The catastrophe had settled all their differences. He was quite glad to find Haines unhurt—childishly glad—effusive. This sullen, red-headed

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fellow, who a few moments before had been doing his utmost to kill him, got out a handkerchief and carefully wound it around Kirk's wound.

"Let's try to find the old lady," he said. "She's about here somewhere. I thought I heard her voice under that sail."

Together they started off to search for her. As they were doing so they were joined by Gibbs and Mackay. The newcomers brought news of Jackson.

"I guess he's done for," said Mackay. "He was still breathing when we reached him in the 'top, but anybody could see he was a goner. Charley was lying stone dead beside him."

"Who's unaccounted for?" asked Kirk. His tone took on its usual authority. He was reminded that it was time to assert it.

"Beale."

"You can pass him," said Kirk grimly. "He's lying under the main boom, and it will take a jack to get his body out. Who else?"

"Matthews and Harding."

"Gibbs, you try to break your way into the doctor's cabin and find us a little whisky, and anything else you can see in the way of medicines and bandages. Smash open the lockers with one of the fire-axes. And some water if you can find any—there'll still be some in the butts."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"The thing for the rest of us to do is to find Matthews and Mrs. Hitchcock and Harding."

They began searching again, scattering so as to cover the largest field. A cry from Mackay brought them all together as fast as they could run. He had discovered Harding and Matthews where they had been flung beneath the

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mainsail. The canvas was ripped open, and Matthews crawled slowly out, none the worse apparently for his temporary imprisonment. His companion, however, was insensible, and it was no easy matter to drag him through the wreckage to the unencumbered ground beyond. They were all very shaky and bruised and exhausted. Kirk's shoulder throbbed mercilessly, and at times it was all he could do to stand. Never was anything more welcome than the sight of Gibbs with a bottle of whisky and half a pail of water. Some of the raw spirits was forced down Harding's throat, and he was gradually revived. He opened his eyes, asked where he was, swore feebly, and then sat up. The others made cups of their hands, and greedily drank the allowance Kirk served out. It was a scanty one, and Kirk refused their request for more. They could easily have obtained the bottle by force, and they eyed it longingly as he kept it close beside him—but no one stirred a hand. The swift retribution which had overtaken their mutiny, and the desperate part Kirk had played in it, had cowed them into servile obedience. Each was eager to ingratiate himself in the captain's favor, and forestall the day of reckoning.

Kirk sent them back to look for Mrs. Hitchcock, while he made his way, painfully, and dragging every step, to where Jackson and Charley Nesbit were lying, still within the top. The great searchlight, with its complicated apparatus of lenses, generators, tubing, and valves had burst all over them, and was emitting an overwhelming stench of gas. The two men were locked in each other's arms, the one dead, the other dying. In Nesbit's face there was a look of unutterable horror. His eyeballs protruded, his mouth was open and distorted, he had seen—and understood—the death he was to die.

Jackson presented a less repulsive spectacle. He had the

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air of being asleep. His withered cheeks, his bald head, his benignant mutton-chop whiskers, had miraculously escaped the pollution of blood. They drew out his lifeless body and laid it on the ground, buttoning his uniform coat together to hide his crushed and bleeding chest. Kirk was in the act of covering his face with a handkerchief when he heard Haines running toward him. The man was so unstrung that he could hardly speak. He stood there in hysterical agitation, endeavoring to compose himself.

"Found her?" asked Kirk.

Haines's answer was lost in the convulsive movement of his lips. Kirk turned to him and hastened toward the little group that was signaling to him wildly. But the fellow caught him by the arm, and suddenly recovering speech, broke into a frenzy of self-exculpation. He had never wanted to desert the party. The others had forced him—literally forced him—might he be struck dead that minute if he wasn't telling the absolute truth! Beale had held a knife to his throat. Beale was a black-hearted villain. Both Jackson and Mrs. Hitchcock had wanted to heave to and make terms—to get back was all they wanted—to get back to Felicidad. With all hands, of course—with all hands. But Beale—! If Kirk turned against him now he was a dead man. Would Kirk accept his diamond pin? It was worth twenty pounds. And he had a mother and two sisters dependent on him. Kirk must think of them. An old mother and two sisters! He was too young to die. He ought not to be punished for what Beale had done. It would be monstrous if he were punished for what Beale had done. Kirk must stand by him. Kirk must save him from the vengeance of the others.

Kirk looked him squarely in the face, and said he would make no promises.

"You fellows can do your own saving," he said. "I

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won't lift my little finger to befriend any of you. But if you are given any sort of trial, I'll bear witness as to how you acted now, and it will probably count a good deal for or against you. If you pitch in with a will and do everything you are told, I'll go as far as to stand up and tell them so."

Haines thanked him incoherently, trying again to force his trumpery pin on him. In the midst of that indescribable havoc, with the dead lying about them, and confronted by an ominous and terrible future, the irony of such a bribe made Kirk's lip curl. Finally, goaded to fury by the fellow's beggarlike insistence, he cast the pin to the earth and ground it under his heel.

"Whining won't help you," he cried. "Get to work, you dog, get to work!"

He had no more time to waste on the creature, and stumbled forward without giving him another thought, Haines sticking to his heels like a whipped cur, and officiously attempting to assist him over the obstacles in their path. Together they reached Mackay and Gibbs, who were bending over Mrs. Hitchcock in bewildered astonishment. The old woman was sitting huddled up on the ground, giggling and grimacing as though it were all an excellent joke. As the ship capsized she had been flung against a canvas ventilator and carried down on a veritable bed. "Like shooting the chutes," she explained, bubbling over with hysterical merriment, "and then splashing through eternity at the bottom!"

"I am thankful you are alive," said Kirk.

"So am I, young man," she returned with unimpaired sprightliness. "*Moi aussi, je vous assure!*"

He wondered whether he ought to tell her of Jackson's death, and on second thoughts refrained. She would find it out fast enough as it was. But her crazy gayety, so discordant amid the universal ruin, seemed at the moment

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proof against all misfortunes. Babbling, nodding, energetically gesticulating with her hands, she persisted in a vivacity that under the circumstances was hardly believable.

"Have any of you gentlemen seen my little black bag?" she inquired with a sudden anxiety, the first she had shown. "Can't afford to lose that, you know. Must find it. Must find it. Hee-hee! Has my letter of credit, you know, and my keys, and my beauty box. Hee-hee, my little black bag! You all know my little black bag! I was holding it in my hand as the ship rolled over!"

The four men obediently took up the search, and groped about in the litter and wreckage. At such a time it seemed a piece of fantastic childishness to be looking for a little black bag containing nothing more valuable than a letter of credit. A sandwich would have been of infinitely greater worth. But the old lady shrilly urged them on, and it was plain they would get no peace till the little black bag were found. They might have been looking for it yet had not Gibbs been lucky enough to find it under a tangle of gear. Mrs. Hitchcock clutched it from his hands, and uttering joyful exclamations of gratitude, hastened to assure herself as to the safety of its contents. This done, she turned to Kirk.

"Captain," she cried, "I put myself at your orders. It's your business to tell us what to do, and it's ours to do it—hee-hee—isn't it, Gibbs?"

"My idea is to find a mirror somewhere, and keep flashing our position back to camp," said Kirk. "It will give them the general direction to reach us, and if night falls before they arrive, we'll build a fire, and send up rockets at intervals."

"I am sure Captain Jackson would approve of that," she said. "Hadn't we better go and tell him?"

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For a space no one answered. It was Gibbs who was the first brave enough to answer.

"Why, ma'am," he faltered, "the poor gentleman was in the foretop when she——"

Mrs. Hitchcock turned very pale, trembled, and pressed her hand to her heart. Gibbs would have said more, but she stopped him.

"I—I think I'll sit down here a little while, and—and—rest," she said at last. "No, don't stay with me; I would rather be alone. That is, if there is nothing I can do for him?"

"There's nothing," said Kirk. "Nothing that you or anyone can do for him now."

They left her sitting on a spar, and when they turned and looked back, she was seen on her knees, praying.

"She allus thought a lot of Jackson," said Mackay.

"More than I ever did, the domineering, overbearing be—" began Gibbs.

"Hush," exclaimed Kirk. "He's dead now, and has passed beyond criticism. The thing for us to do is to dig the reflector out of the searchlight and rig up an apparatus to swing it on."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Gibbs deferentially.

"It can't be more'n twenty miles to camp," put in Mackay, "and in clear weather like this the flash ought to carry all of sixty."

Haines shuddered.

"And you won't let them be too hard on us, sir, will you, sir?" he pleaded. "I have a mother, sir, and two young sisters that——"

"I've told you it all depends on yourself, Haines," interrupted Kirk sternly. "You fellows will have to earn your forgiveness, and earn it in the next few hours. Do you

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understand? Earn it by hard work and rigid obedience to orders!"

Heartily protesting their intention of doing so, the three mutineers followed Kirk to the battered, blood-splashed top, and applied themselves with a will to the extrication of the reflector.

Half an hour later an improvised heliograph was sending its dazzling message across the prairie, and with blinding flashes incessantly cut the arc of the eastern sky.

It was midnight.

The survivors were gathered about a fire, whose beams lit up their shadowy figures drowsing beside their rifles, ready at a word to spring to their feet and defend the wreck from Indian marauders. Here one sprawled his length on the ground, his upturned face gray and careworn in the fitful light, as though sleep itself had brought no respite, and memory was retelling in troubled dreams the desperate doings of the day. There, another, his sinewy hand relaxed on the handle of his Mauser, breathing heavily, and mumbling interminably to himself. And all about them rose a wild tangle of masts, spars, and rigging, seen and lost and seen again as the fire flickered or fell; to one side the impenetrable night, on the other the dim mountain of the *Fortuna's* hull and her wall-like deck, sheerly perpendicular, at once so familiar and fantastic in its altered relation to the ground.

Harding lay on a blanket, moaning faintly, and occasionally calling out in a husky voice for water. Mrs. Hitchcock, spectral and grim, hovered over him, ministering to his wants and whispering encouragement. The old woman, in the hour of disaster, was showing good qualities hitherto unsuspected, and the finer side of her irresponsible and contradictory na-

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ture. In the presence of death and suffering she seemed to rise superior to the inveterate triviality that Kirk had always associated with her. The incorrigible giggler, the scatter-brained monologist, for once stood awestricken before the eternities.

At intervals Kirk put a match to a rocket, and would watch it shoot skyward in a stréak of fire, till, halting in the dome of night, it exploded its little galaxy of stars. Here for an instant they would hang, sparkling brilliantly—crimsons, blues, greens, all intermixed in a vivid confusion—to vanish in the twinkling of an eye, the blackness blacker for their having been.

It was then, it seemed to Kirk, that the poignancy of the disaster most fully came home to him. These fiery signals, so identified with the distress of ships, so long the appeal of castaway and perishing seamen, forced upon his mind an analogy of similar hopelessness and despair.

He asked himself how this vast mass was ever to be righted again. What if those gigantic masts were sprung, the mighty axles twisted, the water tanks burst asunder by the frightful impact with which the *Fortuna* had struck the ground? In the universal ruin about him he saw no means of their ever extricating themselves again. Were they doomed to perish miserably of starvation and lack of water—or, more appalling still, fall slaves to the savages? No, not that, assuredly, for they would die fighting first. Turn as they might, there was but one way of escape, and that was by the *Fortuna*. Their lives depended on their power to right her, to repair her shattered fabric, to spread her torn sails on those splintered booms and yards, and once more entrust their fate to the willing winds.

And if they failed?

He felt within him a welling envy of the dead. In his

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weariness, pain, and desperation theirs seemed the happier fate. Was it not better to go like that—swiftly, suddenly—than to strive day after day against the impossible, with an increasing realization of the futility of all effort? A crushing sense that he was to blame for it all oppressed his heart. Not for having capsized the vessel. That he gloried in. Better to have the wreck of the *Fortuna* than no *Fortuna* at all. It was some satisfaction that Jackson's villainy had been so appropriately punished. He had not a particle of pity for him, or Beale, or Nesbit. They had only got what they deserved. His remorse went farther back. Had he only listened to Vera's pleadings, to her reiterated and passionate appeals, what an incalculable amount of misery would have been avoided. In the retrospect his own stubbornness appeared inexplicable. He cursed the stupid pride that had worked so great an evil. She loved him; she would have appreciated at its full the sacrifice—had he made it for her. Westbrook, who on many occasions had shown such marked and unmistakable regard for him, would have been won over. They would have returned the happiest two people in the world.

And now?

Oh, what a fool he had been! What a fool he had been!

There was a shout in the darkness, the sound of stumbling feet, faint far-away voices calling. Von Zedtwitz strode into the firelight, revolver in hand, a formidable, broad-shouldered figure, full of energy and ire.

Kirk sprang up to meet him.

"Doctor!"

"Kirpatrick!"

Explanations hurriedly passed. The German was in a steaming cloud of sweat, and his voice was vibrant and gut-

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tural from long running. His delight in finding Kirkpatrick alive seemed to outweigh every other aspect of the disaster, and he grasped him in the embrace of a bear. Though less effusive, Kirk's heart, too, was full, and it brimmed over with affection for the honest old German. With Von Zedtwitz there seemed to come an atmosphere of resolution, sturdy courage, and superb self-confidence. The latter declared that he was pleased to find the situation no worse. It was bad, of course. It was a very seerious madder. Ach, but the relief to find his poy all right—his hero poy, who had risked everything for them and saved the day!

They were still excitedly talking as some of the others began to straggle in. Dusty, travel-worn, limping their tired feet, they presented a sad and disheartened aspect. For twenty odd miles, guided by Kirk's signals, they had toiled across the llaño like an army in precipitate retreat. Guns, blankets, water bottles had been thrown away. Those who had dropped out were left where they fell. All cohesion had disappeared. It had degenerated into a mad scramble for every man to save himself.

Kirk was half crazy to learn news of Vera. She, too, had started out with the rest. Only the wounded had been left behind. He eagerly questioned the weary throng as they arrived in twos and threes and threw themselves on the ground. They could tell him nothing more of her, nor of her father. Spiritless and apathetic, they seemed not to care. All they wanted was water for their parched throats, and once they got it they rolled over on the ground like logs. Von Zedtwitz had disappeared to ascertain as best he could in the dark the probable damage to the ship. The only men Kirk could rouse into action were the recent mutineers. They knew on which side their bread was but-

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tered, and showed an almost pitiful alacrity and zeal to serve him.

Taking two of them with lanterns, Kirk went in search of the missing. The folly of the proceeding struck him before they had gone a quarter of a mile. He himself was so spent and ill that he could scarcely walk. They had no means of carrying water, no compass to guide them, no aid, in fact, to give beyond the little whisky that still remained in the bottle. They stood there helplessly under the stars, fearful of going on lest they should lose the direction, and calling out as loudly as they could. There was an infinite melancholy in the sound. It rose in the void like a wail of anguish.

"Hallo-o-o-a! Hallo-o-o-a!"

"Hold on!" cried Haines suddenly.

"It's nothing but the echo," said O'Hara.

"Listen!" exclaimed Kirk.

From far across the prairie, but clear and distinct in the silent air, they heard what seemed to be an answer to their call. Again their own shout went up. Again it was answered by a silvery note that thrilled on Kirk's ears with startling reassurance. He took hold of Mackay's arm, and began to run. Weariness and pain were forgotten.

"Sing out, boys," he panted joyfully. "Keep it going—keep it going!"

"Hallo-o-o-a, there! Hallo-o-o-a!"

Blundering through the darkness, shout answering shout, they at length discerned shadowy figures hastening to meet them. The first was Wicks, who on recognizing Kirk let out a roar like a bull. Devonshire granite wasted no time in greeting, but turned back, eager to pass the good news to his companions.

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"It's Kirk!" he cried. "It's the captain himself! Right as a trivet, and no harm done!"

There was an outburst of exclamations. Kirk found himself in the center of a little group, who seemed ready to pull him to pieces from excess of thankfulness—Wicks, Goltz, Phillips, Crawshaw, Westbrook, and Vera. The upraised lantern lit their pale and haggard faces thronging all about them. Little Crawshaw wept unblushingly. Westbrook, in that mellow voice of his, always so sincere and kind, and now tinged with a singular nobility, thanked God that Kirk had been spared to them.

"I never thought to see you again," he said. "It's like meeting one risen from the grave!"

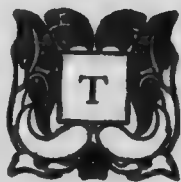
Kirk felt a little, soft hand feeling for his own, and an insinuating girlish body nestling beside him. Vera had not spoken a word, but her eyes, luminous with a strange and tender light, had never left his face. She perceived what had escaped the others.

"Kirk," she said suddenly, "you're hurt!"

"Oh, it's nothing!" he returned. "Arm's a bit dicky, that's all."

And with that he fainted.

CHAPTER XXIII



THE days that followed were hardly more than a blank to him. Looking back on that misty period, his most pronounced memory was that of lying with a clinical thermometer in his mouth. It had a peculiarly flat taste, and he recalled the inordinate amount of coaxing that it took to make him keep it there. There were also intervals of whisky in teaspoons, and nauseating messes of a gray, sticky complexion that he had to be persuaded, with extreme difficulty, to get outside of. There was a bitter taste always in his mouth that even water could not allay. He used to long for it—for water—piteously, and wondered at the hardness of heart that refused him any beyond a meager spoonful. Occasionally he was given fruit—the most luscious looking peaches—that disappointed him beyond measure by their bitterness. Everything was bitter, or mawkish, or distasteful.

It had become the most natural thing in the world to have Vera about. When he opened his eyes and did not see her, he felt a vague sense of indignation. He felt that he was being neglected. He would complain peevishly to the empty air, and the ache in his bones grew worse. There was Phillips, too. He hated Phillips. Phillips and the thermometer seemed to go together. To see Phillips was to know that the glass-testing process was to recommence. Once he chewed it in good earnest, and, oh, dear, wasn't there a commotion!

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As he grew better he used to lie for hours watching Vera. Her graceful head, the turn of her rounded chin, her fair hair, so glossy and thick and soft, was an unending delight to him. He had no idea what a tyrant he was—what an overgrown and exacting baby. When he wanted anything he roared for it as loudly as he could. It was her place to love him, to caress him, to throw over him the mantle of an exquisite maternity. He took it all for granted. He was neither grateful nor ungrateful. But when she was out of his sight he mourned and fretted for her without cessation.

One afternoon he awoke from a long sleep. His drowsy eyes took her in with a strange and new understanding. He motioned her to come over, and he faltered as she knelt beside the cot and took his wasted hand.

"Vera," he said, "I think I must be better."

He noticed her pallor, the dark rings under her eyes, her worn, wan face, beautiful even after days and nights of watching.

"How long have I been here?"

"Let me think. Eight days."

"And you have been nursing me?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you leave it to somebody else?"

"Because I love you, silly boy!"

A delicious contentment stole over him. He felt his hand fondled against her hand, her cheek, her lips. It was sweet to lie there, in a languor of weakness, and be petted.

"I must be a sight!"

She cooed over him.

"With a hideous stubble of a beard."

More coos.

"And yellow?"

"No, no!"

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"And generally disgusting?"

"You have been very ill."

"It was my arm, of course?"

"Compound fracture, with fever and delirium."

"What did the doctor say?"

"That you must obey everything you are told, like a good boy."

"No—but will it be all right?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Soon?"

"Pretty soon!"

"What's going on outside?"

"Heaps of things."

"And all that clanging and banging?"

"That's papa and Mr. Crawshaw—does it bother your poor head?"

"No, I like it. What are they doing?"

"Working at the forge."

"Then they still have hopes of getting her to rights? The *Fortuna*?"

"Hopes! Why, they've done it!"

"Done it, Vera? Do you really mean——?"

"You mustn't get excited."

"Oh, but my darling, you are keeping me on tenter-hooks. She was not damaged?"

"Not irreparably. The forward truck was badly smashed. The mainmast was sprung, too, but they repaired the place by shrinking on hoops of red-hot iron. The maintopmast couldn't be saved, but the foretopmast was doctored into shape. It looks awfully patchy, but Mr. Wicks is sure it will stand. Oh, they've been so busy, Kirk!"

"And the water tanks?"

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"What about them?"

"They held?"

"I suppose so. Nobody has ever said a word about them. But we're getting the same old skimpy allowance."

"Thank God!"

"Now you must stop talking and shut your eyes."

"But you'll stay close to me, won't you?"

"Right here."

"I would have died if it hadn't been for you. I know I would."

"Pooh! Go to sleep!"

"Mayn't I be grateful?"

"Not till you are well?"

"And it is all true about the *Fortuna*? You weren't humoring me, were you? It isn't a fairy tale, Vera?"

"No, indeed!"

"And it's true that you love me?"

"Yes, dearest."

"For always and always?"

"Yes."

"And nothing shall ever come between us again?"

"Never, Kirk, never!"

"I wonder if——"

The rest of the sentence was never said. His hand relaxed. He was asleep.

The girl rose and bent over him with anxious solicitude. The doctor, tiptoeing in, discovered her gently smoothing the sick man's pillow.

"How is he?"

"Oh, so much better!"

"Any temperature?"

"I think not. He has been talking quite coherently."

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Phillips himself looked down at the thin, handsome face, studying it intently.

"I fancy he is out of the woods," he said.

It was indeed the turning point in Kirk's illness. He improved rapidly. Little by little he gradually learned all that had happened since the night of the wreck. Harding had lingered a few days and then had passed away, never having regained complete consciousness. Strange to say, Weaver himself was on the high road to recovery. The little jockey said it was the doctor. The doctor, more modestly, ascribed it to a miracle. But whoever was responsible, the fact remained that Weaver was limping about the camp, ready to play pinochle or checkers with anybody who had a spare moment for such diversions.

The mutineers had been left off scot free, although there had been some wild talk of making an example of them. But every man was precious, and it was policy, as well as mercy, to deal easily with them. The fellows had buckled down with such a will, and had shown such energy and good spirit, that at last by universal consent they were reinstated and forgiven. Bygones were to be bygones, and the past was to be ignored.

As for Mrs. Hitchcock, she had exhibited an astounding capacity to rebound from the grief and contrition that had so recently oppressed her. For a couple of days the dead captain had received the tribute of her broken heart. On the third she announced the dedication of her declining years to works of charity and mercy. On the fourth she began to darn her way into Von Zedtwitz's good graces through his socks, which, it must be said, offered an admirable field for philanthropic effort. On the fifth she was heard to say that such a rugged and noble nature needed but a woman--the

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right woman—to soften and round it out. On the sixth this thought took tangible shape, and was seen in active operation. On the seventh the doctor, presumably softened and rounded out—and certainly ponderously surprised at the swiftness of the performance—was duly captured, tagged, and attached to the Hitchcock string.

It was a wonderful day for Kirk when, leaning on Vera's arm, he was permitted to leave his tent and see with his own eyes the progress that had been made. The camp was humming like a factory. Anvils were thundering, bellows blowing, and the *Fortuna*, now on an even keel, was overrun with men. The different gangs cheered him as he moved along, and crowded about him with handshakes and hearty congratulations. It gave him an inexpressible pleasure to find how little he had been forgotten. It made him proud before Vera to receive the homage of these rough fellows, and see their faces gladden at his approach. It seemed to raise him in his own estimation. It was no small achievement to have earned such affection and good will. How good they were—how good and kind and generous!

And, by George, how they had worked! It was almost unbelievable. One might almost think, to look at her, that the *Fortuna* had never turned turtle at all. There were big jacks under her forward, and the missing maintopmast gave her an unfamiliar look, but once on deck she was to all appearance the same old ship, and not particularly changed. Kirk examined the mainmast attentively, and was most pleased with the job they had made of it.

"What do you think of her, captain?" asked Crawshaw.

"Good as ever," returned Kirk, "and if she doesn't stand up like a Trojan, I'll buy you a new hat."

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"My number is seven and three quarters," exclaimed the little man, grinning broadly.

"I'll make a note of it on my cuff," said Kirk.

"And so you two children are engaged?"

"Yes, papa."

"And friends are to accept this, the only intimation?"

"Yes, papa."

"And the other high-contracting party--can't he speak?"

"It was Vera's idea to do all the talking, sir."

"And what am I to do? Faint with surprise?"

"Yes, papa."

"Do you suppose I haven't seen it all along? Why, I've had you two under a microscope, and kept awake more nights thinking it over than you would believe!"

"It kept me awake, too, papa."

"Worrying about your old dad, and wondering what was to become of him in the shuffle?"

"Partly."

"Mr. Westbrook," said Kirk, "I know very well that your daughter's choice is bound to be a disappointment to you. She is throwing herself away in marrying a man like me—but I love her, and she loves me."

"Disappointment—humph! How do you know it's a disappointment, young man?"

"She has the world at her feet."

"That usually means an earl."

"Oh, papa, do be serious! It's a life and death matter to us."

"Well, you two, listen to me. When I first saw this thing beginning it made me feel mortal bad, I can tell you. I hardly knew what sort of man I wanted for you, but frankly—it wasn't Kirkpatrick. But I was a man of the

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world. I was too wise to show any marked disapproval. The stern parent is answerable for half the unhappy marriages. He supplies an element of romance, and helps to keep the little darlings in a flutter. That wasn't my idea at all. Mine was to wait for the varnish to wear off, and let my little girl see her admirer in his true light. Character was sure to come out. It couldn't be hidden. We are what we are—and sooner or later we show ourselves. Well, the result of all my waiting and watching was to discover that Kirk here was one of the finest, truest, noblest fellows I've ever known. He may not be much on looks——"

"Oh, papa——!"

"But he's a man, every inch of him, and pure gold all the way through—and there's nothing he could ask for that I wouldn't give him. There! I've made it plain, I hope? Tried to, anyhow. And God bless both of you!"

"I don't know how to thank you," said Kirk. "I was not prepared for—for— It means so much to me. It—it means everything."

"And I'm going to love you more than ever," said Vera, throwing her arms around her father's neck. "You mustn't think it's going to make the least difference—because it shan't!"

"But we haven't finished with the thing yet," said Westbrook with dry humor. "I am interested in the young man's prospects. A bit hazy, aren't they?"

"I've been thinking over that. You are going to put him in charge of the new plant in Jersey City."

"Oh, I am, am I? A post requiring every technical qualification, and employing eight hundred men!"

"Kirk can do anything!"

"Ah, no doubt! Big-gun construction being one of those simple things that anybody can pick up—twelve-inch rifles

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made while you wait, and delivered daily in our special van! Pom-poms and three-o-threes left on your doorstep with the milk!"

"Papa, you're mortifying Kirk."

"God forbid! Only let us get down to earth. Falling back on the old man isn't my notion at all. Silly, too, when there is a tidy little independence just over the horizon."

"Papa, you promised me that awful night that if we pulled through you would go straight home."

"That's what I'm getting to."

"No, I am going to hold you to your word. It's all too dreadful and dangerous. I won't let you beg off."

"Who's begging off?"

"You gave your solemn word of honor!"

"I admit it. It was one of those impulsive occasions when the best of us stumble. I lost my nerve—temporarily."

"Kirk has promised me, too."

"So we are both tied up?"

"Yes, papa."

"And so the expedition has to be abandoned?"

"Of course."

"And Zeddy?"

"He can't very well help himself."

"It's just as easy to go on now as to go back. Ask Kirk."

"Are you going to break your word?"

"No-o."

"I hold you to it, papa."

"What about a compromise?"

"Won't listen to any!"

"And condemn Kirk to the bread of dependence, eh? Bitter bread, my girl. He has his hand on a fortune, and you will not let him reach out for it?"

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"It may be all a myth."

"Hundred thousand pounds all his own! Half a million dollars, Vera! At four per cent——"

"It's no good talking, papa. I won't, I won't!"

"Isn't Kirk allowed to open his mouth on the subject?"

"We're both of the same mind."

"Now see here, Kirk, if you hadn't been tied hand and foot in pink ribbon, what would your vote be?"

Poor Kirk hesitated. He tried manfully to lie—but couldn't.

"I—I'd see the thing through," he said.

"How does this going back strike you?"

"Well, sir, if Vera insists——"

"Now, own up—it's a frightful disappointment to you, isn't it?"

"I'd sacrifice more than that for her, sir."

"Sacrifice—ah, that's the word! Frankly, isn't it a great pity to throw up the sponge when we are on the very threshold of the place?"

"Yes, I have to admit it."

"Did you hear that, Vera?"

"Yes, papa."

"Doesn't it count with you at all?"

"But the risk?"

"There's no risk."

"It's because I love you both so much."

"Didn't you tell me at Felicidad that the hardships would surely kill me? Why, I have fattened on them. Never felt so well in my life! It seems to show that you are not always right, doesn't it?"

"I want to go home and live happily ever afterwards."

"Postpone it a few weeks. Oh, my dearie, the game is in your hands! Be a little thoroughbred!"

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"Oh, papa!"

"Please."

"You really and truly like Kirk, don't you?"

"Love him like a son!"

"And believe in him?"

"Absolutely."

"And he is handsome, isn't he?"

"My own image—at his age!"

"And when we get back you will let me ride Toby?"

"All day long."

"And jump?"

"If Kirk will let you."

"And you will be grateful for my giving in so beautifully?"

"Will prove it by a lifetime of devotion."

"Don't laugh about it—it's awfully serious. I haven't said I would yet."

"Then hurry up and say it."

"Papa, I let you off your promise!"

"Hurrah, Kirk! Southward ho, for Cassaquiari!"

"By Jove, sir, we'll make it this time!"

"You won't mind if I run round and tell Zeddy? The poor chap has been eating his heart out. He thought it was all off. The tent door closes at ten o'clock sharp, young lady."

"Just a minute, papa."

"Another string to that agreement? You ought to be ashamed——"

"No, you darling old daddy, I want to give you a hug."

"My lamb!"

"Because, after all—(hug)—I think I love you—(hug)—the best! (Showers of kisses.) Now, run away and play, and keep out of mischief, and don't fight anybody bigger than yourself!"

CHAPTER XXIV



INE days later the *Fortuna*, with her sails furled, lay awaiting Von Zedtwitz's return. To port were some low, reddish hills, rising tier upon tier, till the red melted in the blue and purple of a distant mountain chain. To starboard was the prairie, shimmering like the sea, and as illimitable. Beneath awnings, fore and aft, the crew and officers of the ship were whiling away their time as best they could, and trying to keep the suspense from becoming unendurable. Through the winding gap in the nearest hills Von Zedtwitz had disappeared three days before, leading a party of ten well-armed volunteers. Sixteen miles beyond, as the crow flies, was Cassaquiari. The doctor had been positive of it; had pointed triumphantly at the landmarks in proof; had resented, with fiery impatience, the least doubt being cast on a memory that went back so many years. Unfortunately, the two observations had not agreed. They varied by sixty-odd miles—nearly a whole degree of latitude.

But there were the hills; there was the gap; there the doctor, jubilant and vociferative; every assurance, in fact, that they had struck the right place. They had manned the side, and sent him forth with ringing cheers. That had been at dawn on a Tuesday morning. By Wednesday night they had fully expected the party to return. By Thursday they grew anxious and apprehensive. Friday found them very gloomy indeed.

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"Foretop, ahoy!"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see a flash just now a couple of points off that cliff?"

"No, captain."

"Make out anything?"

"No, sir."

"Keep a sharp lookout!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

This colloquy roused the ship. Dozing men awakened and inquired what was the matter. Glasses were leveled at the place Kirk pointed out. But nothing could be detected. The air, quivering with heat, gave a strange unsteadiness to the bare and crimson hills. They might have been painted on some theatrical drop scene, and wobbling in the draught.

"On deck, there!"

"What is it?"

"They're coming, sir!"

There was a hoarse buzz of satisfaction, followed by a rush up the rigging. Men who had never trusted themselves before beyond a score of ratlines now valiantly assailed the sky itself, racing one another to the tops. Some stuck midway, but yelling lustily and swelling the hubbub that on every side greeted the good news.

"Are they all there?"

"All there, captain."

"Eleven?"

"That's right, sir."

"Any sign of trouble?"

"No, sir."

"Not carrying anybody?"

"No sign of it, captain."

"Who's leading?"

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"Dr. Von Zedtwitz himself, sir."

"What's he doing?"

"Seems to be waving his shirt."

"In distress?"

"Can't say—more like he was dancing, sir."

These meager details were passed on with excited comment. Glasses were focused on the place where at any moment the little party might be expected to emerge.

A tiny speck shot into view. Behind it, in single file, gradually appeared ten other tiny specks.

The sight of them was the signal for a mighty cheer.

Then faces were picked out, with eager and noisy disagreement. It became a burning question whether the fifth speck was Wicks or Jack Cohen—whether the ninth was Henderson or Crandall. To some of the hands these questions assumed a greater importance than the success or failure of the expedition itself.

"It's Wicks, you wall-eyed goat."

"Cohen, or I'll eat my hat! Tell him in a million."

"It's Wicks, just the same."

"Wicks, nothing—it's Jack!"

And so on, and so on.

The human monkey must chatter.

The specks grew bigger—now toy soldiers in size, stepping out briskly. Red, sweaty faces bobbed into the glass—Von Zedtwitz's tawny whiskers—rifles, cartridge belts, water bottles, dazzling bits of metal work. It was exasperating to have to wait; to know nothing; to search vainly for any indication of how things had fared with them. Why had they not arranged on a signal? Von Zedtwitz, bare to the waist, continued energetically to wave his shirt. But that might mean anything. You could take your choice. To some it seemed a good omen. Kirk answered it by breaking

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out the ensign at the main. It satisfied his crying need for action—to do something—to relieve in any way the tension that grew every instant more insupportable. The bright bunting drooped lifelessly at the masthead, refusing to flutter. The sun beat down with an increasing fierceness. The toy soldiers were running now, at a heavy jogtrot, like a troop of boys on a paper chase, but keeping together—a string of shaggy, overburdened men—dirty as tramps—their wicked-looking rifles giving them the aspect of desperadoes.

Von Zedtwitz put both hands to his mouth, speaking-trumpet fashion.

The ship hushed.

Tense and breathless, everyone waited in a fever of impatience to learn the news.

Was the treasure still there? Or had others got in before them? Or were they, after all, sixty miles out of the true position?

“CRAWSHAW——”

Every ear was strained. Crawshaw! Had the doctor gone crazy?

“WAS BITTEN——”

But there was the little man himself, spectacles and all, skipping like a colt!

“BY A SNAKE!”

This extraordinary piece of intelligence, so remote from the subject that was desperately agitating them, overwhelmed them with an astonishment verging on dismay. What of Cassaquiari? Of the treasure? Of all those ardent hopes for which so much had been already sacrificed? They stared at the doctor in amazement, expecting him to bellow, in his resounding voice, the yes or no on which everything turned. But he seemed to consider that he had set all their

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curiosity at rest, and resumed his ponderous double at the head of his men.

The ship broke into a wild uproar. Discipline was forgotten. The gun crews deserted their stations, to which Kirk, ever mindful of danger, had assigned them at the first ambiguous gesticulations of the old German. It had flashed across his mind that possibly the little party was being pursued, and that they had roused a hornet's nest in that hollow of the hills. But the men raced pell-mell for the gangway and, with shouts and huzzas, streamed over the prairie toward their comrades. Kirk, too, caught the contagion and darted down. He grudged every moment that kept him in ignorance. The ship might take care of itself. The point was to reach Zeddy, and reach him quick.

The old fellow stood panting in the center of a mob.

"A wiper," he was saying, "no longer than that, but flat-headed and wicious, and it stung him just above the ankle. Ah, but it was what you call a close shave! Many times I said: 'He will die. Assuredly he will die!' And ach, how he screamed! You wouldn't think so little a fellow could scream so big. Had I not some potash permanganate, and most carefully rubbed it in, you would never have seen him again!"

"But Cassaquiari?" demanded Kirk, beside himself. "What we want to know is whether you found Cassaquiari?"

"Of gourse we found Cassaquiari," returned Von Zedtwitz, irritated at the interruption. "Was I not sure? Did I not say it with positiveness?"

"And the treasure? The gold?"

"It was there where the snake was. I thought I heard a hiss, and so, brompthly, I said——"

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"Oh, hang the snake! Good Heavens, man, is the treasure actually, positively, there?"

"Of gourse."

"Just as you left it all those years ago? Just as you described it to us?"

"Why, certainly, captain."

"Bars and bars of it?"

"Hundreds! Ask Wicks."

"Ay, that's a fact, sir," said the first officer. "Lord! but I never saw such a mountain of metal in all my days, and stacked so nice and tidy that it might have been the Bank of England. It made a fellow blink to think that every ingot of it was virgin gold, and enough to buy a row of cottages in the High Street of Appledore."

Crawshaw came bustling up to shake hands. He looked not a penny the worse for his bite, and was in uproarious spirits.

"Captain," he cried, his eyes shining through his spectacles, "the treasure was the least of it! But the crumbling buildings, acres big, all covered with figures and hieroglyphs—the courts—the triumphal arches, lopsided and toppling—the mystery and gloom and vastness of it beggars all description. Imagine the grave of a vanished civilization—a London of forty centuries ago—a forgotten Rome. It seemed to catch a fellow by the throat. You were overawed in spite of yourself. You stood in the middle of it all——"

He paused, at a loss for words to go on. The colossal picture in his mind could not be translated. Speech was inadequate.

"Corking!" said Wicks solemnly, filling the breach.

CHAPTER XXV



IN the first flush of enthusiasm and joy it seemed as though the object of their voyage were as good as already gained, and little thought was given to the obstacles that yet had to be overcome before the Inca treasure might in reality be called their own. To have reached the limits of the llaño was one thing; to transport fifteen tons of metal thirty-one miles or more from its mountain stronghold was quite another.

A tentative effort, made with one of the automobiles, showed in a very disheartening fashion the impossibility of carrying out their original plan. The powerful car, stripped like a racer, and lightened of every superfluous ounce, attempted in vain to force the passage of the hills. The direction was constantly lost; rocks and declivities intervened; a day was spent in arduously accomplishing nothing.

It became evident that such haphazard dashes were a mere waste of time. In going forward the circuitous road behind was forgotten. It was as hard to get the car back the dozen miles it had covered as it had been to push it on. That night, in a council of war, it was determined to survey a track to Cassaquiari, mark the way with guide posts, blast and level what bad places were encountered, and, if necessary, build some light bridges. It was a formidable undertaking for so small a party, hampered besides by the need of guarding the ship, and having always to keep on board of her a sufficient crew to resist attack.

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But they had come too far, and had endured too much, to shrink now before this last colossal task. The knowledge that the treasure was indubitably there, and had actually been seen and touched by some of the more fortunate, animated all hands with an heroic resolution. Men hardly ever learn the limit of their physical power, having, in ordinary life, so small an occasion to exert it to the breaking point. But once rouse their imagination, and dangle before them the prize of all others that incites human effort to the supreme degree, and you call into being a race of giants.

For five weeks the dogged work went on. Shift by shift every hour of daylight was utilized. Axes rang, felling trees on the scantily wooded uplands; blasts detonated, hurling bowlders in the air; backs bent to shovel, crowbar, and pick; and the dusty cars, bearing tools, dynamite, food, water, and encouragement, incessantly passed and repassed, honking good will, and at times even proffering their strength to drag out a loosened rock, or to tug some timber into place.

With indomitable energy, mile was added to mile, and the rough track carried steadily forward to Cassaquiari. Every day the cars penetrated farther, skirting chasms, shaking the flimsy, newly built bridges, cautiously rounding curves where there was scarcely an inch to spare—impatient monsters, reverberating hoarsely, and demanding their promised loads of gold.

Though his arm was out of splints Kirk had been forbidden by the doctor to use it overmuch, and the poor fellow chafed at the idleness that was thus forced upon him. He was condemned to stay by the *Fortuna*, where though he found plenty of things to occupy his leisure, he grudged to the others the inspiring work he was not permitted to share. From the foretop, whose dizzy terrors he had taught Vera to despise, the pair would sweep the hills with their glasses,

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and pick out, as far as their eyes could discern, the tortuous road that was to open the way to the golden city.

It was a matter of some bitterness to them both that they were never to see Cassaquiari. Westbrook had flatly said so in one of his rare moments of asserted authority. Their divided forces kept him in a constant flutter of alarm, and he, alone of the whole party, had Indian on the brain. A few of the aborigines had once been seen to the southeast, darkening the horizon for an hour and then sinking over it. But the memory of them had remained to torment the old man with visions of attack and massacre, and he repeatedly declared that neither Kirk nor Vera should ever leave the ship.

It was hard, during those long, hot and interminable days, to be so closely confined on board. In the general sense of security engendered by the profound peace about them, Westbrook's nervousness appeared more and more absurd and unreasonable. He was always insisting on vigilance, in season and out; with his own hands he tended the machine guns daily, and saw that the working parts were oiled and bright; the rifles in the chart room were likewise a constant preoccupation to him, and he kept them ready and loaded for the first call to quarters. At night he was out of his bunk a dozen times to see that the anchor watch was awake, the station lanterns lit, and the officer of the deck alert and at his post of duty.

In fact, he caused not a little grumbling and irritation by the strictness of the precautions he took on himself to impose. The anchor watch, dozing here and there under improvised shelters, resented his nocturnal toe feeling for their anatomies in the dark and the bull's-eye lantern shot suddenly into their sleepy faces. Caution was all right; in the abstract everyone believed in it; but as instilled by

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a savage old gentleman at two in the morning, it was universally abhorred.

Even Kirk and Vera grew a little impatient under his restrictions. They pleaded and argued with him in vain to be allowed to see Cassaquiari before they left the place forever. They derided the thought of Indians; hotly denied that there was the least risk in the world; pointed out the injustice of this wonderful sight being withheld from them when it would be so freely accorded to the others. But the old fellow would not give way an inch. His daughter was his daughter, he would say—uncontravertibly; and Kirk was needed to sail the ship. He could not afford to let either out of his sight. Nor, to satisfy this objection, would he consent to go with them. The very idea appalled him. Cool and courageous in the face of real danger, he was a veritable poltroon before that of his own imagining. Phillips ascribed it to the reaction following extreme mental excitement; said it was common in soldiers after a battle; gave it a Latin name.

All this while, day in, day out, the work in hand went on indefatigably. Dawn saw the cars leaving the ship, loaded with men and material. Dusk saw them returning with the exciting report of what had been accomplished. In the stifling galley Hildebrand stirred his great pots, scanned his bursting ovens, brewed his huge coppers of coffee against that mighty supper when all hands reassembled on board. No Vikings in the past ever did better justice to a board than the weary and voracious *Fortunas* after their day of toil. Even under a torrid sky the white man can dig his black brother under, but he makes up for it by an onslaught on meat and vegetables, on coffee, marmalade, and pudding, that is truly terrific. Kirk was inclined to view with misgiving this frightful inroad on their provisions, but Von

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Zedtwitz declared with his deep laugh, that it would lighten the ship for the gold to come; and Westbrook affirmed the old truth that the human engine responds in proportion to its fuel.

"Feed them up now even if it means short rations afterwards," he said. "To stint the boys now would be fatal."

And the "boys"—not stinted—gobbled up whole barrels of salt pork and beef, whole cases of marmalade, jam, and honey, immense crocks of butter, mountains of new-made bread; rough, homely fare, but good for muscle, for endurance, for prolonged and heavy labor under the fiercest sun that ever shone; with tobacco always following, of course—old-fashioned niggerhead as black as the ace of spades—no molasses here, but all leaf—solid, hydraulically compressed to the hardness of stone, the very anthracite of the weed, one charge of which would keep a pipe going for hours. Good days—not to be recalled in after years without a pang of sentiment for the honest fellows who had shared them.

The track crept up and up. The ten-mile post was planted—the twenty-mile post—the thirty. The excitement grew fast and furious as the end loomed near. One night but one car returned; the other was in Cassaquiari! Yes, in Cassaquiari, its crew camping beside it, and eager for the honor of bringing down the first load of treasure! The news sent the ship wild with delight. Cheers rose on cheers. Bearded men hugged one another, and capered on the deck like children. Pistols were fired in the air. Everybody yelled himself hoarse as though in duty bound to make all the noise possible. Tin cans were beaten; pots, barrels. One brazen-lunged individual got hold of the speaking trumpet and, in deafening tones, demanded cheers for Westbrook, for Kirk, for Mrs. Hitchcock, for Zeddy, till ex-

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hausted nature could no longer respond to the ear-splitting invitation. Ten minutes of pandemonium; of frantic, uncontrollable joy; of boisterous abandonment of all restraint. Ten million dollars was theirs to divide on the capstan head. Ten million dollars, hip, hip, hurrah! Everyone of them was rich, rich for life, and in a few short days they would all be homeward bound! No wonder they cheered and yelled and danced till the forecastle shook. The prize was gained! It lay over there in the darkness, guarded by their trusty mates. It was as good as already aboard. Ten million dollars, by George! Ten million dollars! And nothing to do now but to bring it down and stow it, and then bear away home, with every stitch drawing alow and aloft!

At daybreak Crawshaw, Von Zedtwitz, and Henderson got away, inaugurating a regular schedule that it was intended to maintain till the last ingot was under hatches. At four bells of the morning watch the other car appeared in sight, swiftly darting over the prairie, three men on the seat, five more clinging as best they could to the long narrow deck behind. Honking furiously, the car drew up under the *Fortuna*, and as the newcomers sprang up the gangway they were received with outbursts no less loud and jubilant than had welcomed Crawshaw the night before. But the excitement was suddenly hushed to a breathless suspense as Goltz, at the head of his little party, marched aft, clicked heels, and saluted Kirk with German punctilio.

"Have the honor to report our arrival on board, captain."

"Very good, Mr. Goltz."

"Was too overloaded with men to bring down more than forty bars, sir."

"Where are they?"

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"Alongside, sir."

"Mr. Wicks?"

"Sir!"

"You have rigged a block and tackle to the foreyard?"

"It's all in shape, sir."

"Then hoist in the stuff, and stow it in the lazarette."

"Very good, captain."

A few moments later, as the first batch of ingots dangled in the air, there rose shout upon shout that swelled to thunder, followed by a rush to see and actually touch the wonderful prize that at last was within their grasp. The sling was opened on the deck, disclosing forty small, dark, flattish bars, uniform in size, and deeply pitted with the corrosion of time and damp and mold. A centipede scurried out of the heap, and was forthwith trampled on. There was a minute of tumultuous exclamations, of crowding in, of rubbing the dirty metal with wet fingers, of horseplay and boisterousness. Then routine asserted itself.

"Stand back, there! Stand back!"

"Mr. Wicks?"

"Sir!"

"The officer of the deck will tally off the loads as they come, and will make a note of the bars in duplicate. One he is to keep; the other he will file with Mr. Westbrook."

"I understand, captain."

"You, too, Mr. Goltz, will follow the same instructions."

"Quite so, sir."

"There will be no deviation from this system on any account."

"Very good, sir."

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"Afterwards we'll shift enough cabin stores for'rard to trim ship."

"Ay, ay!"

Westbrook, at the lazarette door, saw the treasure safely deposited within its dim interior. All but one bar, which he retained and carried to the table, laying it carefully on a towel to prevent it smirching the cloth. The afterguard silently and intently watched him file a small surface clean, and drop a few globules of acid on the glittering place.

"It's gold, all right," he murmured. "Yes, it's unmistakably gold."

Then he heaped a little mass of filings on a watch glass.

"I will assay these," he continued, looking up. "I suspect silver, and perhaps a little lead. The color is a bit light—you can all see that, gentlemen—too light for absolute purity. But I hazard the opinion that it will work out to about nineteen carats fine."

CHAPTER XXVI



FOR the succeeding period everything was subordinated to the task of bringing down the treasure. Each car was able to make two round trips daily, covering a distance of a hundred and twenty-odd miles, and averaging a thousand pounds to a load. Crawshaw, Henderson, Goltz, and Weaver were the chauffeurs—one on, one off—each when on duty accompanied by a helper drawn in turn from the crew, who vied with one another for the opportunity. Goltz and Weaver owed this honor to their knowledge of cars, each having behind him a wild and spendthrift past, in which their respective motors had been the most innocent of their extravagances—Weaver, twice winner of the Oaks, once of the Derby, and for an hour the most courted little man in England—and Von der Goltz, the dashing Uhlan, who had flung two fortunes to the wind inside a year, and had been broken for an escapade that was the nine-days wonder of Berlin.

How Kirk envied these four their skill, as day after day they came and went, while he himself was condemned to a grinding inaction. It was unbearable to watch the great, gaunt cars leave the ship, and blithely fly across the prairie in exhilarating freedom; more bitter still to see them return, dusty, panting, sluggish with gold, the grimy pair on the racing seat fresh from wonders he was never to be allowed to behold. Vera was as chagrined as he, and hotly declaimed against her father's restriction. It was absurd. There was

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not the faintest risk. They were being sacrificed to a whim—singled out, alone of all the ship, for what was tantamount to punishment.

Their indignation was increased by the fact that Westbrook, in spite of all he had said, himself went up twice, and returned with the most glowing account of his experiences. His assumption that he was immune from danger, while they would be sure to attract the thunderbolts—was made the subject of a fierce and unanswerable argument. But the old man was inflexible. Vera should not go. Neither should Kirk. Beauty might storm and clench her little fists and half cry with vexation, but it was no, always no. The climax was reached when Mrs. Hitchcock, audaciously ignoring Westbrook's prohibition, choo-chooed off with Goltz, and spent a rapturous day in the mountains. This was the last straw. It was unendurable that the old lady should achieve this while they remained fettered. For nearly seven weeks, remember, the pair had been confined to the narrow deck of the *Fortuna*, wistfully eyeing the hills, and longing as only prisoners can long for freedom. The exacting old man would not allow them to stray from the ship, nor even walk up and down beside it. To defy him, in his nervous and highly worked-up condition, would have been to cause a scene from which they both shrank. But——

The conspiracy dated from Mrs. Hitchcock's return. It was hatched that very evening after Westbrook had turned in. There was no lack of confederates. The sympathy of the whole ship was with Kirk and Vera in their enforced imprisonment aboard. If they were to see Cassaquari at all, time had to be taken by the forelock, as there was already nearly twenty-four thousand pounds' weight of treasure stacked, tier upon tier, in the depths of the lazarette. The

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afterguard entered whole heartedly into the plan of screening Kirk's and Vera's absence from Mr. Westbrook. The pair were to get away secretly with Crawshaw after the midday meal—the best time, it was judged, for undetected flight—and the others were pledged to distract the old man, and allay, on his part, any possible suspicions of the truth.

Indeed, his whole afternoon was mapped out for him in advance: chess with Von Zedtwitz—developing photographs with Phillips—a descent into the hold with Wicks for a rough stock-taking of the provisions. It seemed a stroke of luck that this last-named matter had been fretting Westbrook for some little time. It was but another example of his increasing fidgetiness, since Kirk had trained Hildebrand into an exact system of bookkeeping, by which an account was kept of every pound used, and the store list nightly posted like a ledger. But at this juncture the proposed examination, so long opposed as unnecessary, now appeared most fortunate.

Luncheon was just over. The afterguard, under an awning, and with both quarters of the ship screened from the glare without, sat drinking their black coffee on deck, and lazily smoking and talking. Westbrook was deep in a game of chess with Von Zedtwitz. Phillips, his long thin legs curled up, half lay in a hammock, humming contentedly to himself, and occasionally reaching out a hand to feel for his cup. Mrs. Hitchcock, her bonnet awry and her eyes dancing with mischief, was pretending to tell Wicks's fortune by his hand. The air was somnolent with heat. The drone of a concertina was wafted from the forecabin. Under the lee of the galley, his bread marshaled and about to rise, Hildebrand was sleeping the sleep of the just, and snoring melodiously. A profound peace had settled on the ship. The moment for flight had come.

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Kirk slipped away first. As Vera, a minute later, rose quietly to follow, her father fixed her with his gaze. It was so formidable that she faltered and stood still. But absorbed in his game it was questionable if he had even seen her. It was a stare of preoccupation, blind and introspective.

"Check king," he said.

She waited till the doctor moved, and then, as her father again bent his head to the board, frowning thoughtfully and tugging at his mustache, she mustered up all her courage and walked away.

Kirk was waiting for her a dozen steps down the gangway. Below him were Crawshaw and Henderson beside the car, looking up expectantly, and smiling from ear to ear. Vera was hurriedly assisted into the seat beside the former. Kirk clambered up behind. Henderson turned over the engine, and jumped in beside him. There was a grinding sound of gears, a leap forward, and they were off.

They sped over the plain like an arrow. The air beat deliciously against their faces and roared loudly past their ears. The powerful car, vibrating with an untamed vigor, flung itself forward with an impetuosity that brought the heart to the mouth. At times, intoxicated with motion, Crawshaw opened the throttle and seemed to shoot them into space—easing down again in sudden terror for his springs. Behind him, holding on for dear life, Kirk snatched fleeting glimpses of the *Fortuna*, and watched her diminish in their wake. There was no sign of animation on board of her. All was lifeless and still. Her slanting masts quivered in the heat, and her long awnings drooped over the recumbent figures below. Westbrook had not detected their escape.

But as he looked back he could not resist a certain uneasiness as to his own conduct in the matter. He almost regretted that he had not faced up to Westbrook and boldly

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demanding as a right that which he was now taking by subterfuge. But such a course, successful as it was sure to be, would have been at the sacrifice of Vera. And after all her longing to see Cassaquiari was not a whit behind his own. He was not the first man who had paltered with his conscience and put his honor in jeopardy to please the woman he loved. Not that he put the blame on her—God forbid—but he had a sudden, piercing realization that they were doing wrong and might have to pay too bitter a penalty for their escapade.

He tried to nerve himself to stop Crawshaw. He felt a singular tremor of alarm to see the ship dwindling so fast behind him. The immensity and loneliness of the scene scared him with a sense of an evaded responsibility. What was he doing? What was he risking? Good Heavens! his rash project verged on the disloyal, the dishonorable. But shame—the thought of Vera's disappointment—a sort of embarrassment at showing indecision before his subordinates—all withheld the order on his lips. Well, he was in for it now. It was too late to draw back. And——

All qualms vanished in the exhilaration of the ride. Crawshaw handled the car superbly and knew the track like the palm of his hand. Just as one's toes crinkled with the expectation of landing the next instant in eternity, the brakes would squeal, the chassis would seem to bulge up in the middle, and presto, they were past the obstruction and again flying like the wind.

Little by little the gradients increased; turns multiplied; the backward view showed how swiftly they were mounting. The *Fortuna* was lost altogether. A scrubby vegetation appeared; an occasional cactus; a clump of bluish aloes. The fifteen-mile post whizzed by.

"Halfway!" ejaculated Crawshaw, sizzling round a

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precipice that hardly allowed them a foot to the good. It was hair-raising to have him talk when he ought to have concentrated all his attention on his steering. But he would insist on exhaling information in abrupt sentences, turning his head to make sure that Kirk heard him. "This was all blasted, captain.—See that rock? Dislodged from up there and came down like an express train!—This was the hardest bridge of all.—Yes, my idea to build it out and strut it from beneath.—Oh, it's solid, don't worry!—Wait till you see it from up there, and it'll make you dizzy, though!—I was let down on a rope, Miss Westbrook. Yes, swinging in the air with a nullet and cold chisel.—Well, somebody had to do it, you know."

And all the while, at a pace that hardly ever relaxed, they twisted and turned on their upward way. Before long they met Weaver and Haines, who, in the second car, had been waiting for them at a sort of siding. The engineer explained that this was the regular point for the cars to pass, thus insuring to each a clear road in either direction. Here there was a short parley to take the newcomers into the secret. They were to be sure and keep their mouths shut about seeing Kirk and Miss Westbrook. The ex-jockey grinned indulgently. He was a perky little man with a puckered, fox-terrier expression, and an appearance of withered youthfulness.

"I don't blyme you," he said, in his chipped Cockneyese. "It's a plyce to see, and no mistyke about it. It's like having the British Museum set out in the grass, and the first time I was up I felt like arsking for a check for my umbrella!"

Haines gave a little shiver.

"Anybody may have it for me, captain," he exclaimed. "Gad, a fellow's all the time turning his head like a Zulu

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was going to jump out at him with an assegai, and as for this gold business, it's about as gay as passing coal on the orlop deck."

"There's human nature for you," said Crawshaw contemptuously, as the two cars parted with a mutual honk-honk of farewell. "Weaver, he has to have his cheap little joke and make game of the place with his umbrella and all that—the sort of chap who would snigger in heaven and talk about the clouds being damp to sit on—and Haines is growling because the road is too heavy, and making it out a grievance that we have so much of it! Has it ever occurred to you, Miss Weaver, how little poetry or noble feeling there is in the average man?"

With a roguish glance at Kirk, Vera expressed her pleasure in Crawshaw's implied superiority.

"I can't tell you how I love all this," he went on simply. "I try not to let it become common to me. It's so easy to get used to things—the familiarity that breeds contempt, you know. It makes me glad that you are to see Cassaquiari, too, and be a part of the immortal memory of it. What a picture you will make in all that grayness and oldness and silence, so young and charming in——"

It was a sad come-down to be poked in the back and told to keep his eyes on the road.

"You will sentimentalize us over the edge if you aren't careful," cried Kirk. "One thing at a time, old fellow."

"And a little slower on the curves, if you wouldn't mind, Mr. Crawshaw," pleaded Vera.

The man of sentiment looked hurt and relapsed into taciturnity. It is hard to be a poet, embryo, or otherwise. The bourgeois mind is always so nervous for its skin, and is capable of shutting up Shakespeare rather than take chances on a cliff. They had run a good many miles before the engineer

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recovered his usual buoyancy and good humor, and began to expatiate enthusiastically about a place they were nearing.

"We call it the lookout," he said, "though the Inca's Chair is also one of our names for it. From there we can look straight down to the *Fortuna*, and open out a big part of the road we have been coming over. If it isn't the finest view you ever saw, I'd like to hear the name of any that can beat it!"

They were soon able to judge for themselves, emerging from the shadow of rocks and trees, to attain, with delightful unexpectedness, the high, bare shoulder of the mountain. Here there opened before them an unimpeded view of the hills and valleys that separated them from the *Fortuna*, which, far below on the carpet of the plain, lay like a toy at their feet. Crawshaw stopped the engine and allowed them to gaze without interruption at the panorama unrolled before them. The little party drew together, as though in the desolation and immensity of the scene they felt an instinctive need of close human companionship. Kirk, before in his life, had stood on higher altitudes and looked down on scenes no less spacious and noble; but these had been in countries where other men lived, where a roof, a terrace, or some sinuous line of rails had softened the wild and untamed face of nature. Here, however, in the untrodden solitudes of a continent, the spirit had no such solace. A vast loneliness oppressed him, a profound and daunting peace, a crushing sense of abandonment.

For the first time he appreciated and understood how Westbrook, more imaginative than himself, perhaps than any of them, had allowed a not unreasonable fear to devour him. For a moment he quailed himself, and his hand on Vera's turned cold. Thoughtlessness, he reflected, is the commonest masquerade of courage. Yes, he had been thoughtless; he

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had not before realized the precariousness of their situation; hundreds of miles of scorched and waterless desert divided them from all help; the smallest disaster to the *Fortuna* might easily cost them all their lives. He had a vision of bones bleaching in the sun; of sand drifting over skulls and skeletons; of a fate as mysterious and unknown to the living world beyond as that of Ross or La Perouse.

He exerted himself to throw off this somber humor, and so far succeeded that he was soon laughing and talking in complete forgetfulness of his obsession. He made fun of Henderson's patched trousers; had a gay altercation with Crawshaw as to the difference between troy and avoirdupois weights; and with many a little jest and home thrust, too trivial to be repeated, reasserted a nature that could not long remain clouded. They got on board the car again and, in the best of spirits, proceeded on their way.

"Only three miles more," said Crawshaw. "I say, Miss Westbrook, if you'll lean over a bit you can get a peep at the Arc de Triomphe. We call it that just to give it a name, you know. Can't make it out? There, follow my finger!"

Kirk followed the finger, too.

Both he and Vera cried out with a simultaneous exclamation.

Rising buttresslike against the sky was a mighty arch, the first outpost of the dead city beyond.

CHAPTER XXVII



URMURS of astonishment rose to their lips as the great arch loomed into closer view. Colossal and solitary, fantastically carved with hieroglyphs whose meaning had been lost for hundreds, possibly thousands of years, it towered toward the sky, mysterious, savage, awe-inspiring. To the left was a building of vast extent, and of the same crumbling, grayish stone, its proportions undiscernible and lost in the jungle that everywhere hemmed it in; that broke through massive walls; that with snakelike roots pried enormous blocks of masonry asunder, and toppled giant pillars off their pediments. One hardly knew whether more to wonder at the persistency of the attack, or the enduring obstinacy of the defense. The latter was the weaker no doubt, but those stupendous frontages of stone were destined to resist for many a century yet to come, and by sheer immensity defy the inroads of all-destroying nature.

Above them could be seen a richly carved façade, its bold and primitive design of a singular beauty, ennobled as it was by the hugeness of its size, and the inordinate amount of labor that had been lavished on its execution. The eye caught glimpses of interminable galleries, pillared and ghostly; of terracelike projections tottering crazily in the azure; of shattered, undistinguishable masses of stone, tumbled headlong into débris. There were other buildings frowning down at them, as enormous, as crumbling, as weird as the one they skirted. These, too, teased the imagination with what was

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left unseen. There seemed no ordered arrangement at all—no coherency. They rose as capriciously as rocks from the sea, fortlike and grim, in a wild confusion of ruin, but always with the tantalizing suggestion that much was withheld, was hidden; that further mysteries lay beyond; that the most wonderful of all was awaiting to be discovered. On a distant hill stood a pyramid, flatter than any Egyptian, and with a roadway spirally creeping around its sides. The feet tingled to mount it, to stand on the top. One longed to plant a flag there and leave a letter in a bottle. It was surprising to hear Crawshaw say that none had reached it, though many had tried. They had no time for that sort of thing. It would take a day at least, so dense was the jungle, so frightful the thorns and lianas. No time, though it was hardly more than a mile away.

Vera and Kirk had talked of "seeing" Cassaquari! See it, indeed! Why, to do that one would need an army of laborers—machetes, dynamite, ladders, a permanent camp, and months of time. Von Zedtwitz, perhaps, in the years of his captivity, had got some comprehension of the place in his head. But even he must have groped like a man in the dark. In no more than a few hours what could one do except gaze at several of the façades, peer into some cavernous interiors, trail through the dense undergrowth on a search for fresh wonders, with the possibility of getting lost beyond all finding.

As the automobile impudently broke the quiet, its exhaust echoing with startling distinctness and shivering the stagnant air with an incongruous modernity, Kirk perceived he had come on an impossible errand. He would carry away with him no more than a blurred memory of gloom, grandeur, and decay; a haunting recollection of cliff-like façades, mossy, bulging, grotesquely carved, staring down at him over in-

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tervening jungle; and an undying regret to have to content himself with so little, and be obliged to turn back on the very threshold.

Guiding the car with a sure, deft hand, Crawshaw drove it forward with the nonchalant air of one who knew every inch of the road. Adroitly picking his way round mounds of tumbled masonry, dipping into gullies, and opening his throttle on the rise, shaving with a fine eye trees and stumps and rocks, he at length reached the entrance of the building, rumbled through its damp and tunnel-like interior, and with much winding and turning, picked a diagonal path across the courtyard beyond, to the arches of a gray and devastated wing.

Here, as they came to a stop, were seen some mean evidences of the invasion. A twentieth-century litter lay scattered on a stone floor whose slabs had been hewn and set, as like as not, some centuries before our Saviour's birth: picks and axes, an array of smoky lanterns, coils of line and rope, a can of kerosene, some broken packages of dynamite, sulphur matches, an old overcoat, a tin basin, towel and cake of soap, a smeary drum of cylinder oil stoppered with a small funnel, dirty gunny sacks, a bucket of water. Crawshaw and Henderson jumped down, and without waste of time, and as though following an invariable routine began to light some of the lanterns, shaking them to see if they were full.

"Of course you will want to come down with me, captain," said Crawshaw, picking up a sack, and eyeing Vera doubtfully. "But if it is too much for Miss Westbrook to attempt we'll leave Henderson behind to stay with her."

"Oh, I don't want to be left out!" cried Vera. "I wouldn't miss it for anything!"

The engineer demurred.

"I don't think you ought to do it," he said.

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"And them bats—" put in Henderson, not unwilling to pile up the terrors.

The girl screwed up her courage.

"I'm not afraid of b-bats," she protested. "They don't do anything to you, do they? Bite ~~us~~ —"

"Only flop," said Crawshaw reassuringly.

"Flop, that's all," said Kirk.

"Just flop," explained Henderson.

"Well, let them flop," exclaimed Vera bravely, "and if they s-stick to me, you'll pull them off quick, won't you, Kirk, dear?"

"Indeed, I will."

"But they don't stick," said Crawshaw.

"Never heard of them sticking," added Henderson.

"Mayn't I have a sack?" inquired Kirk. "No reason why I shouldn't bear a hand, too, is there? Don't make company of me, boys!"

"All right, take that one, captain."

"And I, too!" cried Vera, her eyes dancing with pleasure. "Sacks of treasure—just think of it! Crammed full of bars of gold like a person in a melodrama! Oh, Kirk, isn't it wonderful?"

"Banks will seem tame after this," he replied gayly. "You don't have to be identified here, and you draw what you can carry!"

Now that Cassaquiari was no longer a name, but an astonishing and fascinating fact, and the full perception of their extraordinary good fortune came home to him, he was hardly able to contain himself. He seized the lantern Crawshaw had given him, threw the sack over one shoulder, and impatiently demanded to be led on.

They proceeded in single file, Crawshaw leading, Henderson and Kirk in the center, Vera last—entering a dim cor-

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ridor whose twilight gradually turned to darkness as they advanced. Behind them, through the jagged aperture Von Zedtwitz had discovered and broken open so many years before, the streaming sunlight diminished to a speck of fire. The lanterns, at first so feeble, grew steadily brighter. The pin point of day vanished as the gallery turned, narrowed, and sank deeper into the rocky depths. The footfalls of the little party reverberated with a hollow, mournful sound, giving the sense of hundreds softly marching before and after them in an unending tramp.

The air was peculiarly lifeless, as though scant of oxygen and contaminated with poisonous exhalations. It was hard to resist the conviction that the vaulted roof might at any moment give way—either to crush them beneath untold tons of rock, or, falling behind them, block their exit forever. That this dread was not altogether chimerical was proved by several places where they had to crawl on their hands and knees over masses of fallen rubble, or squeeze past dislodged boulders, leaving between them and their retreat obstacles that in retrospect grew increasingly formidable and terrifying, as though door after door had closed behind them, and the bolts drawn on a living tomb.

The gallery ended in a lofty chamber of vague and unknown extent. The upraised hand touched nothing, and the voice reëchoed with richer vibrations. Crawshaw warned them to walk carefully, and led them to a sort of square well in the center. Here some steps descended into a void of impenetrable blackness—narrow, slimy, stone steps, not two feet across, on one side hugging the wall, on the other unprotected by rope or railing. Kirk peered into the gloom over Crawshaw's shoulder. The little engineer started briskly to descend, but was suddenly arrested by an iron grip on his arm.

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"For Heaven's sake, hold on a minute!" cried Kirk. "I want to know where this thing stops."

"At the bottom," returned Crawshaw, grinning at his own repartee, and enjoying the captain's undiluted alarm.

"Great Scott, and where's that?"

"Stay here and I'll show you," he said. "It reaches what we call the main level about forty feet below. I'll light you from down there, and Henderson from the top, and then you can see your way without trouble."

Man and lantern descended into the abyss. At the foot there was a wild flurry of bats, and a vision of flapping black wings, ribbed and skinny, flung hither and thither by the swirl of the engineer's lantern. Its light danced over the cavernous entrances of more underground passages, and was reflected in pools of water that partly concealed the floor. The thought of following cost Kirk a shudder. Vera, too, was clinging to him as though she had reached the limits of her courage, and was on the point of giving way to uncontrollable fear. It was Henderson, more than Kirk, who rescued her from a shameful panic.

"Don't tak' on, young leddy," he said with kindly concern. "It's always the way with those new to it to balk here, and wish to gie back as fast as may be. It's but a passing qualm, and ye ought to know we've all felt it, even them that's now so bold and venturesome."

His voice itself was as reassuring as the words he uttered. There was not a shade of nervousness in that broad drawl. Merely a sympathetic matter-of-factness that was infinitely encouraging.

"Aren't you coming?" cried Crawshaw from the depths.

"Do you dare?" whispered Kirk.

Vera assented tremblingly.

"If you like we'll——"

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"No, no, Kirk; only hold my hand tight, won't you?"

He went in front of her and cautiously guided her down the treacherous steps. Henderson, hanging over the edge above, slowly swung his lantern to and fro. At the foot was Crawshaw holding up his. The descent was safely made, and they found themselves in an atmosphere of penetrating cold and damp. An unwholesome moisture bedewed the walls, and, oozing from a myriad pores, trickled to the floor where it gathered in dismal pools. The blackness seemed to grow more profound, more intense, and the glimmering lanterns were shrouded in an inky pall that closed on them like something tangible. Their feet splashed in unseen water and stumbled over obstructions that disconcertingly blocked their way. It was a nightmare of slime and wet and darkness; of groping and falling; of sudden starts and terrors. All sense of direction was lost. They mounted. They descended. It was a labyrinth without end or beginning. At times the rocky ceiling almost touched their heads; at others their outstretched hands closed on air, and it was as though they were passing through the vast aisles of a subterranean cathedral. Crawshaw would have stopped to elucidate these mysteries, and perkily show them some of the hidden wonders, but they urged him on with a vehemence that sprang from desperation. His willingness to strike aside, to abandon what was apparently the main thoroughfare, for radiating catacombs, to lose them still further in the horrible maze, froze their blood. The little man was proud of his knowledge, and insistent to put it at their disposal. He stepped out as surely as though the sun were shining overhead, and his eyes actually saw the things he described. But Kirk and Vera could not be tempted. They never put foot in the famous arsenal, where in serried thousands the primitive arms were said to be ranged. They

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turned deaf ears likewise to his wish to detain them in the store chambers, and explore their musty recesses. They never tasted the ancient honey, nor shivered, with the pressure of a finger, those chests that fell to dust at the merest breath.

Kirk was on fire to finish with the whole adventure. He bitterly took himself to task for ever having led his sweetheart into it. He was oppressed by the darkness, the choking air, the hideous possibilities of disaster. His heart beat quickly and his brain was in a whirl of apprehension. What would happen if the oil gave out? If Crawshaw were to lose his way, and suddenly confess with horror he knew not how to extricate them? What if they were left, without light or food or water, to face a lingering and dreadful death in those underground caverns? He tried to put these thoughts from him, to affect the tourist-like interest Crawshaw seemed to demand, but it was in vain. He could do neither. His one consuming desire was for the free air of heaven.

At length they stopped.

"Here we are!" cried the engineer, raising his lantern to look at his watch. "How long do you suppose it has taken us, captain?"

Kirk hazarded an hour. Vera, on being pressed, faintly guessed a half more.

Crawshaw burst out laughing.

"Seventeen minutes," he said.

Kirk, incredulous, confirmed the extraordinary fact with his own timepiece.

"It's an illusion," went on Crawshaw. "It's hard to account for. You are closer within the mark than most of them. I've known them to say three hours."

Snapping his watch shut, and bidding them remain where they were, he took a dozen steps from them, and bending

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down, was seen to fumble with a small apparatus on a wooden box. Then he struck a match and held it to what was apparently an acetylene gas-burner. There was a tiny flicker, a sound of escaping air, and two dancing specks of flame swelled into one and suddenly rose in a little fan. The effect was dazzling in the extreme to eyes grown accustomed to obscurity. They found themselves standing in a high and brilliantly illuminated chamber, some thirty feet square and a dozen high, with every nook and cranny of it bared to view. The first feeling of astonishment gave way to unspeakable relief. The long-drawn tension snapped. They could hardly take in what Crawshaw was saying. He wished to have his improvised generator admired, his ingenuity applauded; they could see for themselves it consisted of nothing more than an old meat can, with a seepage of water through a core of unglazed earthenware. Buzz, buzz—carbide—tubing—pickle jar—capillary attraction—and spectacles shining with naïve self-satisfaction.

But there were more exciting things to exclaim over. On one side, methodically stacked against the wall, was an array of dark, moldy, familiar-looking bars, built up in a criss-cross fashion sixteen inches or so above the floor. The inroads already made upon the treasure were apparent in the moss and discoloration that rose, not unlike a sort of wainscoting, to a much greater height, clearly defining a recent line of demarcation. But enough still remained, a fraction though it was of the original hoard, to constitute a fortune running into many hundreds of thousands. Crawshaw made an offhand estimate of three quarters of a million dollars, and lifting up one of the bars gloatingly caressed it.

"It doesn't take many of these to make a fellow happy," he said, in ecstasy; and he rubbed the dirty metal against his cheek, his lips, fondling it like a babe.

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Kirk and Vera, in fascinated silence, gazed at the ingots that had lain thus lost and forgotten for incalculable years. To touch them was as though to bridge the chasm of centuries and close hands with the phantoms of the past. Even in that far-off time gold had been the symbol of all that was precious and desirable. Ease could be purchased with it—pretty women, luxury, power—palaces and slaves. The fortunate were esteemed those who could find it, who could take it, who could keep it. The ages had rolled over this vanished people, and the mocking emblem for which they had struggled, schemed, and fought alone survived them. At what a cost of human misery it had doubtless been gathered together! What countless backs, bleeding under the lash, had won it of mother earth! What wars, what crimes, what tortures had not the amassing of it involved! Gold! the immemorial curse, the immemorial incentive of all human activity—where can you find the least piece of it that is not splashed with blood!

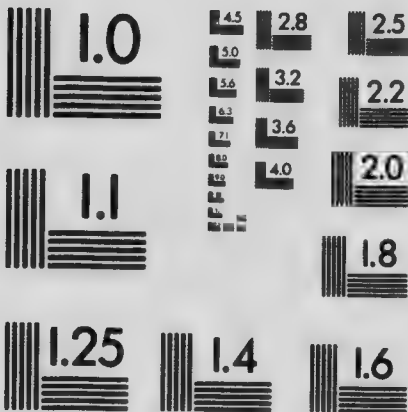
Crawshaw and Henderson loaded their bags. Kirk, in a sort of maze, followed their example. It all made for him an ineffaceable picture—the sunken chamber; the ingots; the white, intent faces; Vera's slender figure so incongruous and beautiful against the dank stone; the blinding fan of flame fed from a tin can still bearing a Chicago label—ineffaceable, indeed, and destined to haunt his dreams for many a night to come.

Crawshaw extinguished the gas, and as he did so the scene vanished forever. The dull gleam of the lanterns hardly more than sufficed to light their feet, and they were again engulfed in an all-pervading night. In single file, the men bending under their sacks, they began to retrace their way and follow out the tortuous passages through which they had originally come.



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It was as eerie a progress as the one before, as ghostly and full of tremors. The rock seemed to crush them in as though with an intolerable weight. They were entombed; the coffin lid was descending; they were suffocating in a horrible, clammy darkness. Such at least, as nearly as can be put into words, were the sensations that no amount of will-power could altogether dispel. The best that resolution could do was to keep them at bay, and coerce the shrinking flesh with appeals to reason, to sanity. Courage only returned as they mounted the side of the well, and found themselves on the upper level. Instantly their hearts lightened; the air grew less oppressive; the rays of their lanterns seemed to penetrate a greater distance and bathe the party in an increased effulgence. It became possible for the first time to talk and laugh with unconcern, to throw aside all apprehensions, to regard the whole adventure as already finished.

Indeed it almost was. A few minutes more and they might expect to see the crack of sunshine at the end of the last tunnel. They redoubled their pace. It was good to think of the daylight beyond, and of the fresh wonders awaiting them. Crawshaw promised them a stay of two hours more, and was himself to be their guide. They were to climb to the very top of the building, exploring it as they went, and then look down on the entire city. As yet they had only seen a tithe of it—had merely guessed at the number and vastness of its ruins. But he would give them a bird's-eye view of the whole; he would lead them out on a certain ledge if they had the daring to follow; he would—

His eager voice was silenced by a long, low rumble, so faint, so mysterious, that it was impossible to detect from what direction it came.

The little party halted instinctively and drew closer together.

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"It's thunder," said Crawshaw, straining his ears. "Yes, it's thunder!"

The rumbling died down.

They went on, slowly and uneasily, whispering conjectures. Perhaps it was a landslide. Or could one of the galleries behind them have fallen in?

"Hush!" cried Kirk suddenly. "There it goes again."

The rumbling recommenced, dully and fitfully.

"It's thunder," persisted the engineer, petulant with misgiving.

"Hardly likely on a day like this," said Henderson.

"Why, there wasn't a cloud in the sky."

"Well, it has to be thunder, for there is nothing else it can be," exclaimed Crawshaw sharply.

"I am not so sure," put in Kirk. "I'm not sure at all that it is thunder."

Then, raising his lantern, he looked the others squarely in the face.

"Crawshaw," he cried, "those are the machine guns of the *Fortuna*!"

CHAPTER XXVIII



FOR a moment they were too stunned to move. Then flinging down their sacks they began to run, urging one another to a frantic haste. The reverberation of their feet on the stony floor drowned all other sound. The consuming thought was to reach the open air and verify Kirk's terrible surmise. If it were the guns it meant that the ship was beset and fighting for her life. It meant that their own retreat was cut off. It meant——

They redoubled their pace, encouraged by the sight of the opening. The twilight made their lanterns no longer necessary, and they dashed them aside to smoke and splinter where they fell. Kirk loosened the revolver in his holster and warned the others to do the same. They knew not what they might find outside, and it was well to be ready for the worst. As they darted into the open, and gathered, panting and breathless, about the car, the boom of the distant guns broke with unmistakable meaning on their ears, rolling and re-rolling with a harsh, furious splutter that told of a desperate battle below.

No time was lost in taking counsel or making plans. Crawshaw started up his engine and they were off in the twinkling of an eye, with a headlong rush that tossed caution to the winds; Vera beside the engineer; Kirk huddled on the floor at her feet, his long forty-four glistening across his knee; Henderson standing up behind, his tall figure swaying with every lurch of the car, his face set and grim,

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as he stared unblinkingly in front of him, overtopping them all.

They shot down the track at a lightning pace, with a grind of brakes at the turns, and skids that threatened to pare the tires off the rims. Crawshaw handled her like a racer, which meant he took his own life in his hands, and forgot that the others had any to lose. But fast as he went the straining hearts he bore wished for faster still, and voices shouted to him madly to let her out. Every second was unendurable that kept them from the lookout point. To get there, and see what was taking place below, was the one dominating thought. No speed was swift enough and in a delirium of recklessness they called for more, more, more.

They tore like a whirlwind down the last stretch, and ran out on the shoulder of the mountain as though to bound over the precipice beyond. The brakes, set hard, failed to bring the car to a standstill, and the metal screeched shrilly as she glided, with barely checked momentum, toward the yawning brink. Had not Crawshaw meshed his reverse in the very nick of time they would have all plunged into eternity. But they had no time to commend him, nor to shudder at the narrowness of their escape. Their eyes were fixed on the *Fortuna* far below, and her plight, now startlingly visible, engrossed their whole and undivided attention.

She was bearing away under full sail, hotly pursued on either flank by black, seething masses of mounted savages. Flame was spitting from her sides, and the air was rent by sharp, low detonations that rose and fell irregularly like the popping of distant crackers. The wind, though steady, was far from strong. The horsemen easily kept pace with the ship, and occasionally some even outran her, and attempted to head her off as they might a wild bull. But the *Fortuna*

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drove into them with resistless force, and her wheels jolted over human bodies that failed to escape in time, or were shot down from the foremast rigging as they turned to fly. At first sight it seemed a most unequal contest, with everything in favor of the whites. But the pertinacity of the savages, their fanatical resolution, their enormous numbers, unthinned and undismayed by that hail of death—all shook the confidence of the onlookers as to the ultimate outcome, and conjured up a horrible premonition of disaster.

These wolves of the Ilaño, individually so harmless, with nothing but bows and arrows, spears, and an occasional flint-lock to oppose to smokeless powder and steel-tipped bullets, were in the mass a most formidable enemy, and terrible to withstand. They were capable of beating down all resistance by sheer weight and intrepidity, even as the Dervishes so nearly turned the day at Omdurman. As Kirk gazed down at that tornado of battle, he was staggered to see how slight an impression, after all, the *Fortuna* was able to make on the dark sea encompassing her. Her guns mowed down wide swaths of men and horses; they fell as trimly as grass before a scythe; but the shattered ranks refilled, the scythe cut and cut apparently in vain; the swarming horde neither slackened its pursuit, nor showed, in the aggregate, the smallest lessening of numbers.

Had the breeze freshened, which, alas! it showed no sign of doing, the tactics of the previous conflict might have been repeated with terrific advantage. The ship might then have been put about, and her vast bulk utilized to tear repeated pathways through her enemies and grind untold numbers beneath her wheels. But what wind there was hardly sufficed to keep her moving at more than six or seven knots an hour—a speed prohibitive of all such tactics—and thus

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her most powerful weapon, her mobility, was unfortunately unavailable.

But more alarming than anything was the unaccountable confusion that seemed to reign on board of her. The firing became fitful and unsteady. Several times she yawed wildly, and narrowly escaped going. Tiny figures could be seen slipping down the rigging seemingly abandoning their posts in a panic. The machine guns stopped altogether, though a persistent rifle fire could be plainly heard, and with it a faint, muffled sound of undistinguishable import. Could it be cheering? But the wake showed no signs of increased slaughter. On the contrary the dribble of bodies nearly ceased, and the melancholy ribbon of them, stretching far across the plain, began to widen with great gaps—significant and ominous portent of an ebbing resistance.

Suddenly she wore ship, and the maneuver opened her broadside to view. Then was learned the reason of her apparent abandonment of the fight. Her forecastle was black with men, and a hand-to-hand battle was taking place on her forward deck. The savages had gained a foothold on her bow, and were obstinately holding their own, while, with ropes lowered over the side their numbers were constantly reinforced from below. Figures could be seen struggling frantically to clamber aboard; helping hands were reached out to them; occasionally one would fall back into the boiling, swirling mass from which he had arisen. It was impossible to guess how the fight was going. Axes sparkled in the sun as brawny arms swung them high; rifles cracked; pistols rained incessant bullets; bayonets stabbed out murderously. But the savages seemed not to give an inch, grappling with the whites like beasts, tearing at their throats, wresting their weapons from them, dragging them down to the blood-stained deck in frenzied efforts to strangle

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or club them. About the foremast was the deadliest focus of the battle; and the great stick towered like a standard, under which the whites rallied and reformed their broken ranks. On what a pandemonium of noise and horror it looked down! On what convulsed faces, on what writhing, trampled forms, on what a swaying, raging line of black men and white, rolling furiously back and forth in a shambles of blood!

The battle, like some wild sea squall, drove steadily to leeward. The *Fortuna* dwindled into the immeasurable expanse. The reverberations lessened; her decks grew indistinct; the galloping savages shrank to a mere stain on the red-brown earth. The issue was lost on the dark rim of the horizon, from which nothing emerged but the upper spars and the lofty kites still full of wind. Thus she melted into the uttermost haze, a feather against the sky line, a speck, the mystery of her fate still unknown as she passed from sight, perhaps forever.

In the intensity of his preoccupation Kirk had completely forgotten himself and the others with him. He awoke from a sort of dream and, trembling in every limb, drew his hand across a forehead wet with sweat. For a moment he was absolutely unmanned. Vera had sunk to the ground beside him, and her shoulders shook with an occasional sobbing breath that quavered like a child's. Crawshaw was seated on the step of the automobile, staring into vacancy with a look of unspeakable despair. Henderson lay on the track, his face hidden by his arm, as though for him the world had ended and he realized the helplessness of any further effort.

Kirk put his arm about Vera and drew her up. He pressed her close to him with a tragic pity. He kissed her as he might on the edge of the grave with the tenderness

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and poignancy of an eternal farewell. His warm lips seemed to break the spell that benumbed her. She clung to him, clasping her hands about his neck, and giving way to an uncontrollable emotion. His cheeks were wet with her tears; her slender, girlish body nestled against him, solaced by the sense of his strength and courage and resolution—and, as is the way of woman—calling them all into being by her very faith in their existence.

Soothed and comforted she gradually recovered some degree of composure; and though still deadly pale, and at times quivering with violent tremors, she managed, with the help of Kirk's supporting arm, to totter over to Crawshaw and take a seat beside him on the long step. The little engineer made no movement, not even to turn his head.

"What's to be done?" asked Kirk, breaking the intolerable silence.

Receiving no reply, he repeated the question more roughly.

"I don't know," returned Crawshaw in a listless tone. "We're done for, I suppose. We'll never get out of this." A despondent gesture of his hand confirmed the hopelessness of his words.

Kirk next tried Henderson. He roused him from his stupor of dejection and forced him to get up.

"Don't lie there like a log," he cried. "If this is the end, meet it like a man."

Henderson, risen to his feet, glowered stupidly at him. A dull anger animated his coarse, common face.

"What do you want to bother me for?" he demanded. "Mayn't a chap have a little time to himself before blowing his brains out?"

"Come along and talk things over," said Kirk, ignoring his surly manner. "We're all in the same box, aren't we?"

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There's no use giving up before we have to. Keep your darned brains for a better purpose."

Henderson laughed mirthlessly. He was a tall, spare, reddish creature of a harsh geniality, who was ordinarily rated one of their best and stanchest men. A bit of a philosopher and satirist, much given to jeering comments on things in general, and shrewd home thrusts that made their victims wince. But always cool, always resourceful, always the first to volunteer for anything disagreeable or dangerous. To have him falter now was to Kirk like a blow in the back. His heart grew heavier than ever as he accompanied him back to Vera and Crawshaw. Together they made a forlorn little group about the car.

"Now see here, everybody," began Kirk; "I want you all to listen to me and listen hard. We can't go back to Cassaquiari—that's plain. No food, no hope, no anything. We certainly can't stay here, waiting like ninnies for angels to descend and help us. I've been in lots of tight places in my life and not an angel ever showed up. Well, what's left? Why, to go ahead—to take the gamble—to chance the savages and chance picking up the ship."

"They've got her by this time," said Henderson.

"How do you know that?"

"It's a thousand to one, anyhow."

"Then you don't know. How can you possibly know? The last we saw of her she was still under control. There was still a white man at that wheel, Henderson. How long could she have laid a course if our fellows had been bested? Not a minute, by George. The masts would have been out of her before you could say Jack Robinson."

"And what when the wind falls at sundown?"

"She may have fought herself clear by that time."

"Or not."

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"Yes—or not. That's one of the chances we have to take. We have to go on the supposition that she has pulled through. Admit that she has, for argument—isn't it our policy to reach her?"

"But we may never pick her up at all," said the engineer, putting in a word for the first time. "We've no compass, no means of letting them know our predicament, no certainty of even following her in the right direction. What's to prevent us getting stuck out there in the middle of nowhere?"

"No worse than this, old fellow."

Crawshaw shuddered.

"It's something to die in peace," he said. "There are no Indians here. It's awful to think of being murdered." He half whispered the last word.

"No great difference in the long run," returned Kirk stoutly. "There will be fewer Indians—I'll answer for that. How are we off for cartridges?"

There ensued a grim counting.

Seventy-seven. No, seventy-nine. Crawshaw had an extra two in his trousers' pocket.

A pitiful supply.

"These are as good as a thousand," said Henderson, poking the little heap with a stubby finger. "I take it, captain's idea ain't to fight—it's to get through somehow and if we hammer off the exhaust pipes the noise will worth more to us than any pistol-popping."

"A good suggestion," cried Kirk. "We can make a frightful racket by stripping off the hood and letting the cylinders exhaust into the open air."

"And an increased efficiency," exclaimed Crawshaw, awakening to technical interest. "At least fourteen per cent."

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He jumped up as though to set about the task.

"Oh, not yet!" protested Kirk in alarm. "We don't want to start off shooting like a cannon. We don't want to attract any more attention than can be avoided. There may be no savages at all, remember; or at such a distance that we may slip through without detection."

"But the hood can come off directly," said Henderson with eagerness; "and then it will only take a few taps to do the rest when the time comes."

What a Godsend it was to do something! It is inaction that kills. The task of breaking off the hinges made a welcome diversion. Crawshaw fumbled in his tool chest and handed out tools with a matter-of-fact air as though he drew confidence from their very touch. Henderson, the would-be suicide of five minutes before, briskly seized the hammer and cold chisel and neatly parted the brass. The two covers were flung away, revealing below the compact and powerful engine.

"Be sure it ain't the intakes you smash," he said, gazing into the greasy depths and trying the connections with his pliers. His practiced eyes took in the pump, the magnets, the carburetor, the push rods bathed in oil. All triumphantly passed his inspection. Then he took a look at the tires, and gave each one a friendly kick.

"The auld limmer's ready if you are," he said, smiling at Kirk. "It won't be her fault if we don't make it."

For a while Kirk stood silent, unable to utter the command to start. The unknown loomed before him, pregnant with terrible possibilities. He paused on the threshold, less from indecision than to pull himself together and steel his nerves for the worst that might befall. Crawshaw's wail returned to him with tempting significance—"To die in peace! To die in peace!" Ah! in contrast to the horrors

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awaiting them below was it not better, after all, to submit to the inevitable, and choose the easier way? To choose their death, instead of having to accept it in some horrible and agonizing form, amid shrieks and powder smoke and raining arrows and thrusting spears? The cowardly flesh would have it that Crawshaw was right. The soul within said No, and again No; a brave man fights to the last, and then falls if he must, with unconquered intrepidity.

Vera's eyes, so brilliant, so wild, so insatiably fixed on his own, pierced him with indescribable pangs. Her beauty, her youth, her grace and delicacy never seemed to him so precious as at that moment, when, with a breaking heart, he mutely took farewell of her. A tear trickled down his sunburnt cheek. He brushed it away hastily. It angered him to feel his self-control so nearly gone.

"Boys," he said in a husky voice, "it's time to be off!"

The engine, at the throw of the switch, began to explode and roar. Kirk hastily changed places with Vera, making her crouch at his feet while he took her former and more dangerous seat beside Crawshaw. The ponderous car leaped back, leaped forward, and with a sharp turn of the wheel and a clang of gears, sped swiftly down the incline.

CHAPTER XXIX



REVOLVER in hand, Kirk and Henderson each watched the road in front of them like hawks, and, at every turn of its twisting course, drew a breath of relief to find it still unbarred and still uncontested. It was so narrow in places that a single good-sized boulder could have held them prisoners, while from above a shower of rocks might easily have been dislodged to destroy them. As they skirted crags and precipices they would keep looking above in involuntary terror, lest with crashing fury some unseen enemy might let fly at them with this primitive artillery. But nothing disturbed their downward passage, and the deep silence was unbroken save by the drone of their coils and the sound of their panting engine, echoing and reëchoing through the rocky gorges.

Their courage rose. Their fingers tightened on their weapons with a surer grip. They began to feel a certain exhilaration in their own hardihood and daring. Man—and the white man most of all—is, indeed, a fighting animal, and once his first tremors are overcome he draws a long breath and is good till he drops. No wonder a general talks of seasoned troops, of the baptism of fire, of the Old Guard. He wants men who have got that second wind, and esteems one of them at tenfold the value of the raw recruit. Kirk grew conscious of the change in himself. He seemed to see it, too, in the visage of the gaunt Scotchman; in little Crawshaw, bent over the wheel, with lips

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compressing at every jolt, and a new light shining through his spectacles.

Mile after mile rolled away behind them, and still they were unchallenged. No dark faces peered down at them, no arrows flew from the ambuscades on either hand. They had the solitude to themselves, and seemed to share it with no other living creature. They were engulfed in a vast loneliness, which was but intensified by the measured beat of the motor and the rhythmic purring of the chains.

Of a sudden, shooting around a curve, they were electrified by the sight of the other car. It was headed obliquely toward them, its nose was rammed into the hillside, where, its engine racing furiously, the overheated radiator was boiling out torrents of water and steam. The seat was empty, but over the dash, in a limp and dreadful attitude, there hung the ghastly apparition of a man.

They jumped out and ran to him. The face, as they raised it and looked into the staring, sightless eyes, was that of Weaver, the jockey. His neck had been pierced by a spear: blood was oozing from a dozen other wounds, discoloring his shabby khaki suit with great splotches of crimson; one hand still clutched an arrow he had torn from his living flesh. They gazed at the corpse with awe, gripping their revolvers and asking one another, in hushed voices, the reason of his errand. Had he been coming to warn them? Had his life been sacrificed to a futile heroism? Or had he borne a message from the ship of peremptory and vital importance?

A closer inspection gave the answer.

At his feet there was a rough package of sailcloth, which, when pulled out and opened on the ground, showed them for what he had died to bring. Here, tumbled together, were biscuits and cartridges, some cans of preserved meat, a demi-

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john of water, and four rifles—snatched, as one might a life belt, to throw to a drowning man. This bundle had cost poor Weaver his heart's blood. His had been the thought, his had been the devotion, and now, as it were from his dead hands, they reverently received his charge.

Presumably with a dying effort, he had disengaged the clutch, and pushed both spark and throttle into the last notch, with a view of daunting his pursuers by the ensuing uproar. But whether this had been done either by design or accident, there was little doubt as to its effect. The sixty-horse engine, reverberating with unchecked and terrific velocity, had been left to rack itself to pieces, and to stem, with ear-splitting menace, the final rush of the savages on their prey. Its own destruction was the price of those few minutes, at most not more than an hour, that had filled the tragic interval.

The rifles—service Mausers with side clips—were hastily loaded; the floor of the car was scattered over with boxes of cartridges; the provisions and demijohn repacked in their original wrapping and carefully stowed in the locker beneath the seat. All this was done in a fever of haste—with a consuming eagerness and impatience—the thunder of both engines seeming to urge them on with a thrilling reminder that every moment was precious. Crawshaw jumped up beside Weaver's body and, pushing it to one side, backed the car to the edge of the ravine. Then descending, all three men laid hold of the wheels, and with a united effort tumbled it over. It crashed down the steep incline like an avalanche, no one looking to see where it finally landed, nor caring. It was enough that the road was clear, and they were free to proceed.

One of Crawshaw's hands was wet and gummy. He

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turned sick as he looked at it, and wiped it furtively on his trousers.

The momentary delay brought flame to Kirk's eyes, and he cried to him savagely to speed her up.

"Don't keep us sticking here!" he yelled. "Hurry! Hurry!"

Crawshaw obeyed, and the engine hummed as he advanced the spark to a twenty-mile clip. The track was too rough to bear more, for they were now on the lower levels where often for considerable lengths the ground was untouched by either pick or shovel. Jolting and bumping on their doubling springs, they held on their way with fierce vigilance, their rifle barrels covering every rock and bush that enfiladed them. It would almost have relieved the intolerable tension had an enemy, indeed, sprung up to attack them. There was something peculiarly trying in the sense of unseen foes surrounding them, of unseen hands bending back venomous bows, of unseen eyes measuring distances and aiming at the heart. If the mind attempted to reassure itself there flitted before it the grisly figure of Weaver, spectral and bloody, the arrow in his dead grasp. Those that had done for him could not be far afield. The wilderness seemed peopled with lurking phantoms, murderous and silent, peeping out from a thousand lairs.

The country grew more open as, with lessening billows, it gradually attained the plain. Rocks and bushes disappeared and with them the gnawing apprehensions of which they had been the cause. No ambuscade was possible on the sun-baked earth unbroken by even a blade of grass. Here there could be no concealment, no sudden burst of arrows, no lightninglike spear, shot quiveringly home from behind a clump of gorse. What enemy there might be had to show himself a mile or more away. The rifle, in cool hands, was

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now a hundred times more formidable than it had been. With its long reach it could laugh at the puny arrows brought against it. Though numbers would still tell, of course; the *Fortuna's* desperate and undecided battle had shown that; but it was good to think that it was no longer in the power of the savages to surprise them, and that before succumbing, they could, if need be, sell their lives most dearly.

At length they drew near the familiar place where for so many weeks the *Fortuna* had stood, immovable and towering, like a ship becalmed on a glassy sea. They slowed down and gazed, with a sort of disconcerted wonder and a strange feeling of homelessness, at the spot they remembered so well. All about them was the disordered litter of their camp—empty melancholy drums of gasoline; bottles; stacks of tin cans; some piles of firewood; a tarpaulin, freshly painted and pegged out to dry; tools still lying where they had been dropped; the pit for the automobiles; spades, picks, mattocks, and crowbars rusting in a heap; and those inevitable scraps of paper, fluttering in the wind, that everywhere seem to accompany civilized man on his wanderings and mark his deserted resting-places.

Beyond, they passed the first body, the forerunner of those fallen hundreds that were to guide them so many gruesome miles across the llaño. He had been caught beneath one of the *Fortuna's* wheels, and lay crushed and hideous, his outstretched hands clawing the earth as though in a despairing effort to draw himself away. Near him was a horse weltering in blood; and a dozen yards farther on were more naked and prostrate forms huddled thickly together as though the same volley had brought them down. And so it continued, with a horrible monotony, a horrible sameness, till the attention grew callous and the flesh no

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longer shuddered nor sickened at horror upon horror. Occasionally a head lifted itself and snarled at them. Figures were passed, with matted hair and dark gleaming eyes, crouching and nodding in a dismal shambles; others could be seen writhing, crawling, convulsively struggling to extricate themselves from the heaped-up dead that smothered them. From one motionless tangle of men and horses a hand moved, its fingers feebly opening and shutting on the empty air. A shattered creature, an eyesore of blood and wretchedness, staggered toward them, gibbering like a maniac, but whether in appeal or defiance or delirium it was impossible to conjecture. They swerved to avoid him, and looking back saw him stumble and fall, to rise no more.

There was a grim satisfaction in the havoc—in the thought of the diminished numbers to encounter, and of the frightful punishment already inflicted. To the white man, in his extremity, the dead Indian is always the best Indian. The trail of corpses seemed to promise that the *Fortuna* might yet save herself. Such a dire carnage could not have been without its effect. With such evidences of a deadly resistance it was impossible not to hope for the best. Surely the men who had defended themselves thus valiantly would not go down before that last onslaught they had witnessed on her decks? Surely the savages must have been weakened and the mass of them discouraged by so terrible a slaughter?

There were horses everywhere, and for these, with whom they had no quarrel and entertained no fear, their pity was unbounded. How mournful were their whinnies, how sad and pleading their eyes, too often glazing in death! Tough, thin, wiry little bronchos filched from the wild herds that roamed at will over the prairie, a fine stock that had reverted to nature—as thrifty as goats, as indomitable as

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Arabs, as tireless and spirited as their far-off sires in Andalusia. The car, grinding on its second speed, startled many into floundering and ineffectual attempts to rise. Others, dragging themselves miserably on three legs, snorted, reared, and tried to run, only to fall exhausted before they had covered a dozen yards. One, instead of alarm, showed an unmistakable pleasure in their approach, and cantered after them, neighing and trumpeting. He was a dark chestnut stallion, with every rib showing and his shrunken belly streaming blood. For a few miles he managed to keep up with them, and then, in spite of frantic exertions, he gradually fell behind and disappeared.

The sun set in a wild and fiery splendor, the warning of heavy weather soon to come. The wake of battle thinned and at last abruptly ended. Before them stretched the plain, as pathless, as illimitable as the sea. They stopped the car and, getting out, put ear to the ground in the hope of some guiding sound. But there was none, leaving them with no alternative but to blunder forward and keep as straight a course as they could—the sun their compass till dusk and then the starry firmament of the Cross. But where? To what? The *Fortuna* lay somewhere in that aching void, but how slender the chance of ever finding her; and if found, might not their success be more terrible, more heartrending than any failure? What if they came upon her, ghostly, gray, and silent in the night, her decks a charnel house, her crew sleeping their last sleep beside her guns?

They moistened their throats with a draught of the warm vapid water. Eat they could not. They had neither the time nor the inclination to eat. On, on, on—that was the impelling instinct. To put, if possible, their awful doubts at rest; or, perhaps, God willing, to find the ship all well and safe, and friendly hands outstretched to grasp

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their own. They started again, their spirits descending with the sun, the long shadows darkening their souls within. Cramped with long sitting, worn out by devastating emotions; body and brain alike spent, dejected, and despairing, they resumed, with gloomy acquiescence, their racking, toilsome way.

The twilight deepened into dusk. The Cross glimmered in the southern sky. Moving, always moving, yet they seemed to make no progress, the dome above, the flat below, and they themselves remaining in the very center of an unshifting world. They swept the pitiless horizon in vain for the least break—for the faintest gossamer of spars and rigging that somewhere or other lay beyond in the infinite solitude. But nothing rewarded their straining sight. They were alone on an ocean.

The engine began to splutter and gasp. It took no expert to tell that something was seriously wrong with it. The car slowed down. It stopped. Crawshaw made no reply to the anxious questions addressed to him. He ran behind, bent down, and then reappeared with a face haggard with bad news.

"Tank's dry," he explained curtly. "Been leaking for miles. The old wagon has run her last yard!"

He leaned both elbows on the dash and looked up at them. The action was articulate of hopelessness, of apathy, of there being nothing left.

"Run her last yard!"

They were castaways, indeed.

The radiator was boiling sullenly. The smell of roasting metal and hot oil was wafted back to them. It was hard to realize that their willing giant had given up the struggle and was now no more than an inert mass of steel. They regarded the massive steering knuckles and the huge

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tires with an exasperated dismay. A leak! What an intolerable, what a crushing misfortune!

Kirk was the first to put a good face on the matter—the cruelest and hardest duty of leadership.

"I don't know that we need cry about it," he said. "Perhaps we are as well off here as anywhere. The ship is sure to beat back for us to-morrow."

"If anybody is alive to do it," muttered Henderson in sinister agreement.

"We're going on that idea," exclaimed Kirk angrily. "If she's gone—well, so are we—and all the gasoline in the world wouldn't help us!"

Crawshaw nodded.

"Captain's right," he said, pulling out his pipe and lighting it. "That is, if the rest of those beggars aren't too close to us." (Puff, puff.) "If they are" (puff, puff), "we are in a nasty place" (puff, puff), "and no doubt about it." (Puff, puff.)

Kirk and Henderson followed his example. For several minutes the talk ran back and forth on the same subject—the risk of going on, were such a thing possible; the risk of staying, which now had to be accepted as unavoidable—and the likelihood or not of the ship picking them up. It was determined to demolish the deck of the car and keep a small fire burning all next day. Here was another peril, but what other means did they have of signaling their position? A column of smoke would carry twenty miles at least, and though the savages might see it, so might also the ship.

It was Vera's voice that thrilled on their ears with a startling interruption.

"Hush!" she exclaimed. "I am sure I heard something."

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There was an instant silence.

"Over there," she whispered. "Listen!"

From the gathering shades there came the faint and measured tramp of innumerable feet, the sound of horses' hoofs, the clank of metal, and an undistinguishable humming as of a marching host, drawing nearer and ever nearer.

They sprang to their rifles and waited, with thickly beating hearts, for what was to befall. Cock, cock, cock, back went the triggers. Death was approaching with muffled tread. Teeth clenched and muscles tightened. It was the end at last.

From out of the night there rose a dark line of men and horses, the foremost ranks of a dim and straggling army behind. The course of the savages was not directly toward the car, but rather as though to pass it within a distance of twenty yards. The breathless little party waited for it to swerve and face about; waited for the yell of exultation that should discover them; waited for the terrific onslaught that would roll up to the very muzzles of their weapons and carry everything before it.

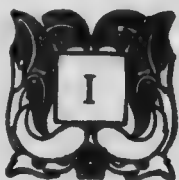
But to their stupefaction there was no sign of turning. The long and plodding band held on its way in silence. Impassive faces regarded them. A hand was pointed—that was all.

It was only by degrees they penetrated the mystery and understood the reason of that grim, slow and stumbling progress through the dusk. There was hardly a man there who was not wounded, hardly a horse that could more than move out of a walk. This was why those naked figures swayed in their saddles, supported by the upraised arms of others trudging on foot beside them; why, from every stirrup, some wretched, limping creature held himself from dropping and clung with the tenacity of despair to what for him meant

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life itself. It was the shattered remnants of the horde that so few hours before had pressed the ship so hard. Spent and broken, maimed, bleeding, and hardly able to drag one foot after another, they passed in slow procession and silently disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXX



It was some time before anyone spoke. In spite of the witness of their eyes they could not at once shake off an instinctive feeling of apprehension. Their rifles followed their vanished enemy, and they waited breathlessly for some act of treachery or guile. It was only as the shuffling footfalls died entirely away that they were able to comprehend the full extent of their good fortune. Not alone immunity from attack; that, incredible and surprising though it was, seemed nothing compared to the assurance of the *Fortuna's* safety. For surely that was what was implied? How otherwise could they explain the forlorn spectral retreat of those dejected hundreds? The ship triumphed! The heroic handful on board of her had contrived to save the day, and with supreme exertions had wrested a complete and crushing victory.

They shook hands on it with the fervor of men reprieved at the foot of the gallows. "She's safe, she's safe!" they repeated in an ecstasy of delight. They laughed uproariously in a revulsion that verged on delirium. Rescue was close at hand. A few hours, that was all—a few hours, and then—! By George, what a shave it had been! Their lives had hung by a hair. And everyone of them had been stanch. Everyone of them might be proud of himself. None had flinched nor faltered. Die hard, that had been the order, and they would have done it, too, and the last man alive would have shot the young lady through the heart!

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Henderson bragged incoherently of the Anglo-Saxon blood. There wasn't a Dutchman nor a frog eater fit to tie their shoes. He wandered off, with enthusiastic inconsequence, to the combined British and American fleets sweeping the world. He called for this international event to begin forthwith, maudlin with relief and excitement. Crawshaw was scarcely any better, nor Kirk nor Vera. All were intoxicated with a joy that mounted to their heads like wine.

Before they could get back to earth, and while they were still in the throes of a feverish and almost agonizing elation, their attention was suddenly held spellbound by a flash of light. It shot into the sky before them, a thin, brilliant shaft like that of a far-distant beacon, and moved restlessly to and fro as though scouring the heavens with a tongue of flame. It was the ship calling to her children across the night! It was the *Fortuna*, questioning the blackness with her vivid searchlight, seeking news and sending it!

Ah, with what a shout they greeted her, as though no thirty miles lay between, as though the spacious prairie had shrunk to as many yards! Crawshaw was the first to recover himself. With trembling fingers he loosened one of the lamps from its bracket, and putting a match to the gas, placed it back at such an angle that ray answered ray, and the two met and crossed each other in the sky above. If good news came, good news also went, and deeply anxious hearts comforted one another in mute communion.

The first thought was to abandon everything and push forward at any cost. To throw aside guns and food, and defying exhaustion, distance, and danger, reach the ship as fast as their weary limbs could bear them. But on maturer consideration the risk seemed too great, and the chance of success too uncertain. They were utterly worn out and in no condition for a tramp of twenty, thirty, perhaps forty

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miles. The prospect of sinking on the way, with nothing to sustain them, and no means of making their position known, was too desperate to be hazarded. Here was food, water, weapons, ammunition in abundance; planks with which to make a fire and raise a pillar of smoke when the sun would put out their lamp; here ease and certainty, with nothing to do but wait, with what patience they might, till the ship beat back for them. It was a hard conclusion to come to. The natural craving was for action; to do and to dare; to fling all caution to the winds. The *Fortuna's* light beckoned to them with an almost unendurable insistence, bidding them to hurry, bidding them to come, restlessly demanding why they hesitated.

They settled themselves on the ground as comfortably as they could. Three pipes in a row and four heads, the last, with silken cheek and lustrous eyes, snuggled cozily against Kirk's blue shirt and murmuring musically in undertones; a sleepy head, so small, so shapely, so glad to lie on that pillowing breast, the glossy hair all tumbled, the slim hands imprisoned so contentedly in a warm and tender grasp. The terrible day was over, with all its shuddering horrors. The good old ship, so long given up for lost, was winking and blinking at them with dazzling encouragement. Ah, how good was life, how good was love, how exquisite the thankfulness that welled from overflowing hearts!

Winking and blinking, indeed. Why was it never still? What could explain those incessant alternations, so regular, so irregular, so baffling and capricious? Kirk, much tantalized, was roused to time the periods with his watch. The short flashes averaged three seconds apart, the blanks ten. He grew immensely excited.

"Crawshaw," he cried, "they're signaling us!"

"Of course they are," returned the little engineer in-

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differently. "I've noticed it all along, only as we haven't the key I thought it would be too disappointing to tell you."

"You don't know the Morse code?"

"No."

"Nor you, Henderson?"

"The dot and dash wig-wag business?—No, captain."

"Who on board the ship does know it?"

"I can't think of anybody but Mr. Westbrook," said Crawshaw. "It would be just like him, at least, to have it poked away in his head somewhere. There's nothing in applied electricity that he hasn't mastered at one time or another."

Kirk cried out delightedly.

"Then he's unhurt! Vera, your father must be safe! That's what he is telling us this minute!"

His words were confirmed by a chorus of enthusiastic agreement. The old man's welfare was most dear to them all. Kirk's deduction was heartily acclaimed. The Morse code, however unintelligible in detail, had yet contrived to pierce the night with one precious bit of news.

All at once Kirk called for pencil and paper.

"I've an idea," he exclaimed breathlessly. His voice was vibrant, almost harsh. The others, thrilling with astonishment, hurriedly sought their pockets. Henderson had a stub of a pencil. Kirk snatched it from his hand.

"Paper, paper!" he demanded in an agony of impatience.

There was no paper; not a scrap anywhere. Hands fumbled and searched in vain. Henderson volunteered to soak off one of the meat labels.

"Can't wait for that," snapped Kirk. "Good Heavens, I must have it, and have it quick! Look again, boys! Look, look!"

"Would sandpaper do?" asked Crawshaw doubtfully.

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"Yes—splendidly!"

Crawshaw ran to the tool box and got a couple of sheets.

"And bring one of the lamps," cried Kirk after him.

"One of the kerosene lamps."

The contagion of his excitement had seized them all. They, too, were in a tremble of expectancy and wonder. They watched him take one of the sheets of sandpaper, turn it over, spread it flat on his knee and, lighted by the lamp Crawshaw held beside him, scribble, scribble, scribble as though his life depended on it. Then he stopped, handed the second sheet to Vera together with the pencil, and asked her, with the same mysterious intensity of voice and expression, to write down the numbers he would give her.

Retaining the first sheet, and mumbling to himself as he slowly counted the flashes, he at intervals called out the following numbers:

"Nineteen, one, six, five, blank. One, eighteen, five, blank. Twenty-five, fifteen, twenty-one, blank. Nineteen, one, six, five, blank."

"Now let's see what we've got," he went on, scanning his key. "What was your first number?"

"Nineteen."

"S—go on."

"One."

"A—go on."

"Six."

"F—go on."

"Five."

"E—that's right!"

"Blank."

"S-a-f-e—safe!"

There was a tumultuous outcry at his ingenuity.

"No Morse code about it!" he explained rapturously,

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as they pressed about him. "Just the old alphabet, numbered regularly down the line. A, one; b, two; and so on! Transparently simple and obvious.—Here, don't bother me. Shut up, Henderson. A little lower with the glim, Crawshaw. What are the next numbers, Vera?"

"One, eighteen, five."

"A-r-e—are."

"Twenty-five, fifteen, twenty-one."

"Y-o-u—you. Yes?"

"Nineteen, one, six, five."

"S-a-f-e—safe."

"Any more?"

"No, Kirk."

He read over the four words.

"*Safe are you safe?*"

There was no time to waste in further congratulations. The pressing need was to answer the ship, and so systematize their work that it should be as little cumbersome as possible. The engineer, with a chamois skin that had been used for straining gasoline, was appointed signaler; Vera timer; Henderson, recorder; Kirk, sender and decipherer. By this division the laboriousness of the task was lessened, and though it was impossible to make it anything but tedious and slow, the results were surer, and much confusion eliminated.

"Twenty-five, five, nineteen," answered Kirk. "*Yes.*"

The following messages are copied verbatim from Henderson's sheet. It was preserved as among the most highly prized relics of the expedition. The writing is coarse and blurred and very difficult to make out. The paper, originally of a light fawn color, has turned to dirty gray, and is so creased and broken that in some cases the words have been guessed at. The ship's telegrams, if they may so

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be called, are in each case marked by an X to distinguish them from the others.

X "*Is Vera safe?*"

"*Yes who asks?*"

X "*Westbrook give casualties.*"

"*Weaver killed.*"

X "*Any wounded?*"

"*None.*"

X "*Ship hard pressed escaped do you need help?*"

"*No.*"

X "*In danger?*"

"*No.*"

X "*Can you hold out till wind rises to-morrow?*"

"*Yes.*"

X "*Will send relief instantly if required.*"

"*No. required.*"

X "*Have you food water?*"

"*Yes.*"

X "*How can you mark your position?*"

"*You mean by daylight?*"

X "*Yes daylight.*"

"*Will make fire to guide.*"

X "*Very good we will find you.*"

"*We ask news specially yourself.*"

X "*Am unharmed phillips killed cohen dying emms ford webster bruce killed.*"

"*Convey to cohen wounded and all admiration of heroic defense.*"

X "*Will obey saying good night.*"

"*Good night.*"

The signals ceased on either side, and soon after the ship's light sank, flickered and went out. Their own, too, was extinguished, and with it seemed to go the stars. The all-

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encompassing darkness resumed its sway, sultry, brooding, and heavy with a sense of impending disturbance. Not that the little party gave these indications more than a passing thought. There were other, and too engrossing matters, to absorb their whole attention. In hushed voices they repeated the roll of death; recalled this one and that; mourned for them all, these comrades now no more. A passionate gratitude animated them, a passionate relief—the inexpressible sensations of a soldier who has emerged from the battle unscathed. So happy, so wretched, tears and laughter equally sincere, succeeding each other in a whirl of conflicting emotions.

It was long after midnight before they began to nod. Sleep came upon them so stealthily that no watch was set, no precautions taken. The tired eyes closed. The tired limbs relaxed. One Indian might have butchered them all.

Kirk awoke with warm raindrops pattering in his face. The hoarse note of a squall broke on his ears. He sat up, and even as he did so the heavens detonated with terrific explosions, and flash after flash of lightning lit the slumbering figures about him. They were on their feet in an instant and clustered about him; the rain descended in torrents and the wind whistled and shrieked. Wet to the skin, clinging to one another to withstand the violent gusts, apprehensive every moment of being struck by the lightning that incessantly played about them, they waited in misery for the squall to pass and vent its rage on the black night beyond.

But another followed it, and another. The wind freshened to a steady gale. The rain stung their faces as it drove to leeward as though blown from cresting waves. The fear of thunderbolts gave way; to stand longer in the blast grew too acutely uncomfortable to be borne; they sheltered themselves under the lee of the car, willingly accepting the

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chances of its being struck, all crowding together on the steep like shipwrecked sailors on a rock. Here the dawning day found them, the wind blowing harder than ever, the tropic rain sopping their thin clothes, their feet ankle deep in a muddy pond.

The weather horizon was wild and stormy and part of it hidden by fiercely advancing curtains of rain. Ragged clouds scudded across the sky, dilapidated, fragmentary, lashed to fleecy shreds. Though under the equator the outlook was as bleak and wintry as the North Sea itself, and a penetrating chill froze the little party to the bone. It was idle to talk of fire. Benumbed, cramped, hardly able to move, they were in no state to tear the stout oak deck asunder with the poor tools at their disposal. Nor would it have burned if they had. Everything was soaked and dripping. An attempt was made to obtain a little heat by lighting the lamps, but the heads of the matches rubbed off in sodden paste, and they dared not persevere lest their slender stock should become exhausted. Even in their extremity they had to take thought of the future—of whole days perhaps before the ship could find them—of a possible worse to come.

Famished nature demanded food. Two cans of meat were opened and biscuit handed out; a terrible breakfast, never to be forgotten, devoured under circumstances of inconceivable discomfort, but sustaining, nevertheless, and reviving a sorely needed strength and courage. Then, as the only means left in their power to attract attention, they decided to fire a rifle in the air at minute intervals. The flash might be seen even if the report were lost in the roar and bluster of the gale.

The dreary fusillade began, carefully timed by a watch—surely the most despondent minute guns ever fired, if not

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the most hopeless. And as the barrel grew hot with repeated explosions, hands were greedily warmed on it and another rifle taken in its place. Kirk twice shot his revolver empty and gave it, all smoking as it was, to Vera to put in her bosom. There it lay, begriming the hidden beauty of her breast, glowing deliciously in its satin nest.

Suddenly through the gloom of an on-coming squall, as unexpected and startling as the fabled phantasm that haunts the stormy seas below the Cape, there loomed into view the towering masts and closely reefed sails of the *Fortuna*, driving mistily on the wings of the gale. Gesticulating figures pointed wildly at them. The boatswain's whistle piped shrilly. Men were rushing to their stations and letting everything fly. The huge brakes screamed as steel was ground to steel, and the enormous fabric slowed and stopped.

A ladder was thrown over her side. Bearded faces could be seen, cheering and clustering, in a yellow, glistening mass of oilskins and sou'westers. From the bridge others were darting down, their voices lost in the bursting of the squall which at this moment opened with all the roar of heaven's artillery. Lightning flashed and forked. Thunder pealed. The wind swelled to fury and howled through the rigging as though to carry the very masts before it.

Kirk supported Vera in his arms and, preceded by Crawshaw and Henderson, the little party struggled against the blast and toiled laboriously across the cable's length that separated them from the ship. They painfully mounted the ladder, their muddy feet slipping on its rungs, their icy hands hardly able to hold the wet and slippery rope. One by one they reached the rail and were drawn aboard, to be swallowed up in a mad hurly-burly of streaming oilskins. Kirk had a confused vision of Vera clinging to her father—of the old man's face, pinched with suffering, rapt and trem-

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ulous with thanksgiving; of Von Zedtwitz forcing his burly way to him, his eyes, beneath their grizzled brows, suffusing with a noble emotion and wet with other moisture than the rain; of Goltz, of Wicks, of Hildebrand, of all those tried and devoted comrades, surging and vociferating about him, as though they would tear him to pieces in the excess of their joy.

As in a dream he found himself borne aft, jostled, crowded, almost lifted off his feet. Found himself in the great cabin—warm, brightly lit, disordered with blankets and cots, and reeking like a hospital. Wounded men called out to him. Feeble hands were raised to clasp his own. It was bewildering, pitiful. He stood there dazed, unable to comprehend the transformation.

Mrs. Hitchcock emerged from a cabin door with an armful of dripping clothes. She dropped them to the floor as she beheld Kirk, running to him in a whirlwind of giggles and exclamations. The incorrigible old egoist was as talkative as ever and just as delighted to pounce on a new victim.

She was the doctor now, she cried. Hee-hee, Kirk had to obey her now. Everybody had to obey her now. He was to go to bed at once and tuck himself in with a hot bottle. He had to. He must. Everything was ready. Hee-hee, first aid to the drowning! Hot blankets, hot bottles, hot broth! Hadn't it been sensible of her to see to it? Hee-hee, not such a fool as she looked! Hee-hee, the old woman who lived in a shoe, with so many children.—Oh, Vera was all right! Oh, yes, she'd stake her oath on it! Couldn't have lasted much longer, however. Hee-hee, would have died probably and wouldn't it have been sad! Hee-hee! Though she was getting used to people dying. Wasn't it awful? Quite used to it! Collected locks of hair and mixed them

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up. Didn't know whether it was Phillips's or Ford's, hee-hee! Oh, it was sad the way Phillips cried! He didn't want to die at all. Said as long as he held her hand he held to life—and she had to eat her meals with the other. Couldn't bend her fingers back for an hour afterwards. Hee-hee, how she'd tell them about it in Paris! Would make them stare, wouldn't it—*l'Americaine* who had smelled gunpowder and fired a rifle like a man. Hee-hee, through the deck! But Kirk wouldn't give her away, would he? He wouldn't——

Fortunately for Kirk this harangue ricocheted off him to Crawshaw, who had foolishly blundered into the fire zone, and in the momentary confusion that ensued he took to flight. It was strange to find himself again in his little cabin, surrounded by the familiar and homely objects of everyday life. What an eternity seemed to have intervened since he had last touched that brush, passed that comb through his hair, shaved himself before that bit of mirror! Wonderful to find his pyjamas still beneath his pillow, as though they had never lost confidence in his return! Wonderful to throw back the coverlet and to think of closing his eyes in serenity and peace!

His teeth were chattering as he stripped off his clothes and hurried into bed. He lay all doubled up for warmth, and tried to overcome the chill that mantled him in ice. There was a tap at the door and Westbrook entered bearing a steaming bowl of soup. He sat down gravely on the edge of the bunk and waited for Kirk to drink it, which the latter did, sip by sip each one a trickle of delicious fire. The old man looked very frail and ill, but his mouth was as firm as ever and his expression as benignly unconquerable. As Kirk finished he leaned forward and their hands met and clasped.

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"My boy, my boy," he murmured. "I thank God for this—I thank God!"

"We couldn't have stood it much longer, sir."

Westbrook bowed his head in tragic assent.

"We'll leave this horrible place as soon as you are rested," he said at length. "When do you think you will be fit to travel?"

"This minute," cried Kirk. "That is, if Vera——"

"She has borne it surprisingly well. It all turns on you."

"On me?"

"Yes."

"Then lay the ship on her course at once. It would be a shame to waste such a gale as this when it is in our favor."

Westbrook pondered anxiously.

"We mustn't take any risk," he said. "I fancy you wouldn't know yourself in a glass. It has told on you more than you imagine."

Kirk laughed feebly.

"I'm all right," he exclaimed; "and I need no better medicine than to be homeward bound."

Homeward bound, ah, the magic of those words!

"Then I may tell Goltz?"

"The sooner the better, sir."

"Wicks and he are waiting outside for your decision."

"Bless them—though they aren't to carry away any sticks. Tell them to go easy, sir."

"That foolish girl wants a message. Said I wasn't to come back without it."

"Tell her I'm the happiest man in the world—and the tiredest."

"No doubt about either."

"And that—that——"

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The weary head sank. The weary eyes closed. Westbrook gazed down at the handsome face long and earnestly. A smile still lurked in the corners of the well-shaped mouth; the breathing was as soft and regular as a child's; a veil of contentment covered the careworn features now softened in sleep.

The old man tiptoed silently from the room and held a whispered colloquy with Goltz and Wicks outside.

A few minutes later the *Fortuna*, under storm trysail and treble-reefed fore-topsails, was tearing her way through the dark and flooded llaño. Her great wheels shot up a blinding spray; her great hull rocked and bounded on the groaning springs; her masts bent as though the tortured wood could not long hold back the weight of the gale. Wicks, his thick legs wide apart, his hands clinched on the rail, his speaking trumpet tight in the vice of his arm, dominated the uproar from the lofty bridge, and with masterful eye and rousing voice sped the ship on her perilous course.

Gloom in front. Gloom behind. Dreary, watery stretches of sodden earth. Dripping ropes and thundering sails. A world of wet and wind and emptiness, through which the *Fortuna* lumbered in headlong flight, jolting, bumping, lurching, discordantly creaking from every rivet of her fabric.

Homeward bound!

CHAPTER XXXI



THE gale held. The *Fortuna* outdid herself. Every bit of daylight was taken advantage of, and she was pressed to the utmost. On the afternoon of their third day out, as they drew near Felicidad, it was decided to lighten her of every superfluous ounce of weight in the hope of getting her in by dusk. Provisions were cast overboard; tents; chains; spare chandlery; casks of lubricating oil, of petroleum, of gasoline; extra bolts of canvas; tools; anvils; jacks; ammunition; the machine guns themselves. It was like the stripping of some fleet runner for a supreme and final effort. She picked up with the loss of every ton—fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen miles an hour! Part of the treasure was shifted forward to trim her better. Tables, chairs, mattresses, ventilators, hatches—even the doors were wrenched from their hinges, and enthusiastically sacrificed. Von Zedtwitz, whose cabin was crammed with Aztec remains, had to mount guard to prevent them from following. A crated idol, lashed to the foremast, was only saved in the nick of time from being shot overboard. And all the while the *Fortuna* with loosened reefs swept on with an increasing fury as though to outstrip the storm itself. With buckling yards and backstays tautened till they whimpered and moaned, she was made to fly with a desperate courage that balked at nothing.

“Land ho!”

“Where away?”

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"Three points on the starboard bow!"

"Quartermaster!"

"Ay, ay, captain."

"Luff a bit!"

"Luff it is, sir."

"Trim in the sheets a bit, Mr. Goltz!"

"V good, sir."

"That will do. Belay there!"

It was after five o'clock. The setting sun was hidden in banks of cloud. The wide savannas stretched away on every side to an unbroken sky line, gray, monotonous, never so lonely as at that hour of declining day. The bow was black with men watching for the first sign of the settlement. On the bridge a smaller, but no less eager, party was trying to pick up the flagstaff with their binoculars. Felicidad, once so distant, so inconceivably remote, the end of the universe—now stood, by force of contrast, for civilization itself. It was the first gateway on the homeward road, the first outpost, the solitary sentinel of the hosts beyond.

A speck of flag blowing out bravely!

A blur of tent tops!

The tall and rusty smokestack of the *Moltke*!

Then frantic arms waving hats!

The *Fortuna* rolled on majestically, disdaining to shorten sail or slacken her headway by an inch. Kirk aimed her at the center of the settlement, determined to bring her up, all standing, in the great court itself. He would give the Felicidades a spectacle that would live in their memories forever, and bring the expedition to a magnificent and sensational close. In vain Westbrook urged him to be careful—pleaded—almost commanded.

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"Leave it to me," laughed Kirk. "I'm going to land her alongside the marquee!"

There was a hail of orders, a rush to stations, expectant faces waiting for the word.

Up shot Kirk's hand.

"Stand by! Shorten sail!" he thundered.

The sails came down, lashing and reverberating, flooding the decks with yellow billows.

"Brakes!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Easy, boys, easy!"

The towering hull sped nearer the rows of tents, dwarfing them into insignificance.

"Hard down!"

"Hard down it is, sir."

There was a grinding jar, the groan of metal on metal, a shrill screech dying to a moan.

The ponderous wheels slowly came to rest.

The voyage was over.

A waggish voice from the merry, noisy, hilarious crowd below yelled out: "What ship's that?"

Then came the answer in a stentorian voice.

"Topsail schooner, *Fortuna*, Captain Kirkpatrick!"

"Where from?"

"Three days out of Cassaquiari, in treasure!"

Any further questions were drowned in the salvos of cheers and counter cheers that burst forth from every throat. The lowered gangway swarmed with an incoming throng, shouting and vociferating at the top of their lungs.

Wicks, elbowing vigorously, forced his way up to Kirk.

"What orders, captain?" he asked, in his usual blunt, cool, sailorlike way.

"My dear old chap," said Kirk, "I have given my last

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order and the only captain I know now is this young lady. I've signed on for a life's cruise, and all you have to do is to wish me luck!"

"With all my heart, sir," cried Wicks, "and if I may take the liberty—may God bless you both!"

Kirk's share was four hundred and thirty-seven thousand dollars. He invested the four hundred thousand in first-class securities and devoted the odd thirty-seven to his honeymoon. Vera and he worked their hardest to spend it, but had to admit at last, with great reluctance, that the task seemed beyond them. They were both of simple tastes and, as Kirk remarked, neither of them had been expensively enough educated. He did try a valet, but the creature got so confoundedly on his nerves, and added so much fuss and formality to existence, that he was glad to dismiss him. After a few months' wandering in Europe, they returned to America and settled in Long Island in order that Kirk might be close to the works in Jersey City. He goes there every day in a small steam yacht, and on summer afternoons Vera is usually aboard to meet him on his return. It must be admitted that among their fashionable neighbors they have the reputation of being rather poky people, in spite of their romantic history, who go out but seldom, and do not care to extend a very narrow acquaintance.

It is large enough, however, to include Homer Kittredge. His arrival in America was made such a triumph that Kirk hesitated to obtrude into the blaze of limelight that surrounded him, and only did so at last with the utmost diffidence. He sent up his card at the St. Regis, and tried to appear at ease before the splendid menials that guarded the ducal stronghold and its ducal inmates from such questionable and nervous interlopers as himself.

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The novelist came down in a rush, as gay and boyish and unspoiled as though he were quite an ordinary person, and greeted Kirk with such an exuberance of regard and so hearty a grasp of the hand, that even the hotel clerk was thrilled at the thought of the unsuspected angel he had seen trying to hide himself behind a ten-thousand-dollar Carrara pillar. In less time than it takes to write, the celebrity was outward bound in a spanking hansom, Kirk's promised guest for a week, and his warmest friend for all time. The visit lengthened into months, and was the beginning of an intimacy that grows closer with every year.

The crew broke up and scattered to the ends of the earth. News trickles in from them at long intervals, mainly in the form of a photograph of a baby. At the present moment there are sixteen tiny Kirks growing up in various parts of the world, and a lot of little Vera and Fortuna girls. Next year Von Zedtwitz is to hold a grand reunion at Heidelberg, where as many of the old hands as possible will be got together to celebrate his marriage to Mrs. Hitchcock. Yes, the secret is out, though his friends long guessed whither events were tending. When the old lady quitted Paris, and built that famous reproduction of the Trianon on the outskirts of the venerable town, it was felt that she was laying siege in form, and that the rugged Herr Doctor would soon succumb. His outer works gradually crumbled before the persistency of her attack, and a steel-engraved card, in Gothic characters, now publicly flies the signal of his complete surrender.

At present he is working hard on his book, which, when completed, will run to five large quarto volumes, aggregating two thousand closely printed pages, with sixty-two colored plates, and one hundred and ninety photographic reproductions, and will appear simultaneously in three languages.

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It is entitled "A Brief Record of the Voyage of the Land Ship 'Fortuna,' with Observations and Notes relating to the Ancient Ruins of Cassaquiari, together with an Account of the Author's Captivity among, and subsequent Escape from, the Piapoco Aborigines, with some General Remarks on the Flora, Fauna, and Anthropology of the Mid-South American Region."

Intending purchasers had better order early as an enormous sale is predicted.

In the meanwhile, this unassuming and less authoritative narrative is offered to the indulgence of the public merely as a stop-gap for the more extended work to follow.

(1)

THE END

